Table of Contents

1. Prologue
2. Chapter 1
3. Chapter 2
4. Chapter 3
5. Chapter 4
6. Chapter 5
7. Chapter 6
8. Chapter 7
9. Chapter 8
10. Chapter 9
11. Chapter 10
12. Chapter 11
13. Chapter 12
14. Chapter 13
15. Chapter 14
16. Chapter 15
17. Chapter 16
18. Chapter 17
19. Chapter 18
20. Chapter 19
21. Chapter 21
22. Chapter 21
23. Chapter 22
24. IMPORTANT UPDATE

Prologue

Little side note before reading: I personally think that the first few chapters could be a lot better, but the real turning point is chapter 4 (technically chapter 5). I start using a lot better grammar and start being a lot more descriptive.

Flame's POV

"So," Avalanche said. "We need to get party streamers, confetti, a big sign that says "Happy Hatching Day" or something of the sort, a candle, and anything else we can find that would look good."

"You and Shrimp can go find all of that," Flame said. "I need to find Starf something for his birthday. I mean, our annivers-" he trailed off.

He thought about how much time had passed. It felt like it was yesterday when he had finally thrown his anxiety, insecurities, and worries to the side and make his and Umber's relationship official.

He also remembered that Umber had agreed to be the one setting up their anniversary since he had done it last time. Flame knew he wanted to make it special but couldn't help but worry. Thousands of scenarios always raced through his head about what could go wrong.

"Flame?" Avalanche said. "What's wrong?

Flame looked over at her, still keeping his nervous expression on. They had talked about talking to each other about their issues before, and that's something that Flame needed to start practicing.

"I-I'm just nervous," Flame said. "I mean, Umber is wandering the streets alone and I can't protect him if anything happens."

"Flame," Shrimp interrupted. "wasn't Umber in the war for most of his life? If he survived that, I'm sure he can survive out on the

streets of the Sky Kingdom."

Flame realized that Shrimp was right. Umber survived his whole life, constantly getting into fights with other tribes. After that many years of war, why should he worry?

"You're probably right," Flame said. "I mean, he probably knows how to fight. Besides, he can read now. I don't have to read him everything on the menu, the names of places, or even graphicolls...sometimes," he reassured himself

He and Umber were doing more and more reading sessions than ever since they moved in together and Umber was finally able to read. Flame taught him how to sound words out, but he still needed to learn more, and Flame couldn't help but think about how much he was going to miss listening to Umber read. He did get annoyed at times when Umber asked him to repeat a word 5 times over, but then he heard his soft voice start to read and it always faded instantly.

They got to the store and Avalanche opened the door for Shrimp and Flame. "What happened to the ladies first rule?" Shrimp joked.

"I think we both know who acts more like the lady here," Avalanche said in a half-joking tone.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Shrimp demanded.

"Oh please. You get scared at even the thought of a spider crawling up your tail," she retorted.

Flame immediately thought back to the time that Shrimp screamed like a girl when Chromis snuck up on him once. He thought that it was probably an accident, but he thought that maybe Chromis did have some of Flame's personality in him.

Maybe that's not a good thing? Flame thought. *Or maybe it is and I'm just overreacting.*

"Okay," Flame jumped in. "While you two go back and forth, I'm going to go in and find Starf a present."

"I will never get how you can like that SeaWing so much." Avalanche said.

Shrimp looked up at her with offense written all over his face, but right before he could say anything, Avalanche shot him an unamused look.

"Oh please, Shrimp," Avalanche said. "You know that you're too much of a sweetheart for me to hate." Based on Shrimp's face, Flame could tell that that wasn't much better,

"Oh, ha, ha," Shrimp laughed in a sarcastic tone before kissing her on the cheek. Avalanche kissed back this time, except on the tip of his snout.

"Gross," Flame said and then quickly wandered off, hoping to leave whatever was about to happen behind.

They did this often and every time they did, he quickly hurried away so that they could do whatever they were about to do without him. Something about watching his mother kiss his technically stepfather made his stomach churn.

While Flame was walking through the store, he couldn't help but remember what's happened in the last year. Chromis was almost a year old, his official relationship with Umber was also almost a year old, and Starfs birthday was also coming up. Flame felt like it was only yesterday that he had watched Chromis break his way out of his egg. Of course, it hadn't been yesterday and if it was, he wouldn't be even nearly as close to Umber as he had grown to be in the past year.

He made his way over to the toy aisle to find Starf a present. He thought that his office looked pretty dead and bland. His walls were a mellow beige, his desk was nothing special either. Just a dark brown wooden desk that sat in the far left corner of the room. He also had a massive wooden shelf across one of the walls where he stored all of his patients' files. From the times he was in Zephyr's office, he noticed that there were many things that dragons could fidget with while sitting down but Starfs office had none of that. He thought something colorful could work to bring back some life

there.

Eventually, he made his way over to the toy aisle. Looking down, he could see many different tiny wooden figures, toy instruments, and even some stacking blocks. He thought it looked like a rainbow threw up on everything in this aisle five times over.

He looked around the shelves, brushing his talons against multiple different wooden toys until his eyes landed on a cube. The cube was about the size of his palm with different colors on each side. Each side of the cube had 9 different smaller cubes on each side and he thought that it might be a puzzle of some kind. It looked like just the thing that Starf's office needed.

He took it to the front counter and gave him several gold coins that he was carrying the whole time before the cashier stuffed the cardboard box in a bag. He thought this was a little unnecessary, but he didn't say anything.

That's what the old me would've done, he thought.

He was about to leave the store when he remembered that Avalanche and Shrimp were still in there. While he waited, he decided that he would see what the strange cube was. He took it out of the box and began messing with it. He accidentally twisted one of the sides and thought that he broke it at first but soon realized that every side could turn like that freely. Within seconds, all of the different colored squares were scrambled all over the cube like all of the pieces were put on at random. He soon realized that he messed up the cube and started turning each side to try and get it back to its original colors. Whenever he got one side to match up, all the progress he made on the other side vanished.

He began to get frustrated at it when Shrimp and Avalanche started walking toward Flame and he quickly tucked the cube in his wing. They were both holding multiple bags that seemed to have many different colored decorations in each one of them.

"How are you going to hide those from Chromis?" Flame asked.

"Oh, we're not," Avalanche said. "You are."

"We don't really have much space," Flame said.

He instantly began rummaging through his brain about the numerous places he could hide the bags. After a few seconds, he remembered that there was a panel in their living room that could be clicked on and off just by pulling on it. The hole inside was a cube shape with wood along each wall big enough to fit Umber.

Who would we even be hiding these from? Flame realized.

"Just hide them in your house somewhere," Avalanche said. "I don't know, figure it out. All I know is that we can't keep them at our house. It's too small and he will find them eventually. He finds everything eventually."

"I'll see what I can do." Flame reluctantly agreed after a moment of thinking.

He realized that his mother's house was far too small to hide anything in so that Chromis wouldn't find it. He thought of all the places he was going to hide them and finally remembered a spot they found when moving in. There was a small panel that could be taken off in the wall that led to a small hold that was just big enough for a dragon to fit in. Of course, Umber and Flame never needed to hide anything in their house so they never had to use it.

Umber's POV

Umber was walking the perfect paths of one of the towns in the Sky Kingdom. The sun was up high in the sky and was reflecting off of the many red and black scales that were walking the paths. Many of the SkyWings had gems embedded in their scales.

The sun was high in the sky so Umber guessed that it was probably nearing noon.

He could smell all of the delicious food in the air. His mouth began watering and he was tempted to spend all the money he had on him on food.

No! He thought to himself. *This money is for both of you, Umber. You can't spend it on such silly things like...delicious, mouth-watering food.*

He smacked himself in the face so that he would snap out of the food-drive trance he was in. He looked around and noticed that he definitely got some looks after doing that.

This was the same town that Flame had brought him to on their first date. Jet had given him a paper that had the names of all of the best places to eat, just like she had done for Flame. Most of the restaurants were far too expensive for Umber, so he started narrowing them down.

"This one's fancy," he muttered to himself while he looked through the window of one of the restaurants.

The inside had sparkly wooden tables, and the cleanest red carpet Umber had ever seen in his life. There were many wooden beams beside each table. The tables were fitted so that they were in rows and not scattered all over the place.

He was trying to make their anniversary as good as he possibly could so he spent most of the days asking around about what was on their menu. Most of the restaurants needed reservations so he couldn't exactly walk in and ask what they served. Most of the dragons he asked didn't know what the restaurants cooked, but there was the off chance that he was told a few of the options.

"Are you looking for someone?" a voice said from behind him. Umber quickly turned around and almost hit them in the face with his snout.

"Oh, uh...no actually. I'm just looking inside," he said.

He observed the SkyWing and noticed that he had a golden bracelet on. There were indents all around it with shiny red rocks inside each of them. Umber guessed that there were probably around 8-9. It looked extremely expensive, more expensive than Umber or Flame could ever afford. Umber assumed that this dragon was probably rich and would know a few items on some of the restaurants on his list.

"Hmm. What's the occasion?" The SkyWing said, looking Umber up and down.

Umber was hesitant to tell him at first. He felt a little uncomfortable telling other dragons about him and Flame.

Oh, what's the worst that could happen?

"Me and my uhh...boyfriend's one-year anniversary is coming up soon," Umber said. "And I want to make it as nice as I can."

"Your...boyfriend...?" the SkyWing tilted his head in confusion. "You mean you and another..." he trailed off. "You and another male...".

Umber could feel the embarrassment begin to flood his scales. He was thankful that he wasn't a RainWing at this moment or his scales would probably start to turn bright pink.

"Uhm...yes?" Umber muttered with caution.

Umber's mind began thinking of the endless ways this conversation could end. His heart was pumping so fast that he could feel the blood rush through each of his veins.

"That's absolutely disgusting!" the SkyWing exclaimed. "Know that you and your *boyfriend* are not welcome here."

Umber took a step back in shock and his jaw dropped not knowing what to say. All he could think of was how many other SkyWings had overheard the encounter and might be thinking the same thing.

He ran off not knowing what to say since he had never had anything like that happen to him before, though he hadn't told very many dragons. He only said something when he couldn't make up an excuse fast enough.

He looked behind him a couple of times to make sure that the SkyWing wasn't following him as he flew off. He could feel tears in the back of his eyes as he replayed the words "You and your boyfriend are not welcome here" over and over in his head like a broken record.

He got home and swung the door open as fast as he could and ran into his and Flame's room and began crying.

Their house wasn't anything special. There was one medium-sized bedroom, a rather small living room, and a kitchen. The floors were made of wooden planks that looked slightly rotted underneath the polish coating and their kitchen counters were made of old wood.

Is it true? Are we not welcome there? Are we welcome anywhere? What if that's what everyone thinks about us but just doesn't say anything? He thought. *No. Sora and Jet are dating. They can't possibly be that hypocritical. I mean, they even live together just like me and Flame. Though they don't have their own house, Sora just lives with Zephyr and Jet. What about everyone else though?* The endless different thoughts kept racing through his head like an incurable plague.

He sat in their bed and played the scene over and over again in his head for at least 10 minutes. He was so caught up in the thought that he hadn't even noticed that Flame had gotten home and was standing in the doorway of their bedroom.

"Umber...? Are you okay? What's wrong?" Flame asked with concern in his voice.

Umber couldn't hear him, his sobs were drowning out all of the noise around him. He ran over to Umber and set down the cube that he bought from the store for Starf and sat beside Umber, rubbing his talons along his back trying to comfort him. Umber looked up at Flame and finally noticed him.

"F-Flame?" he said in a sob "I-I didn't think you'd b-be back so early." Umber said with the scene still replaying in his head on repeat. Flame could tell that he was trying to avoid his question.

"Never mind that, Umber. What's wrong?" Flame said. "I haven't seen you this upset since Sora went missing."

When this happened, he didn't believe Jet at first and half expected Sora to jump out from a bush when they ran to go look for her. He remembered being so upset and then so relieved when they found her.

"I-I was out looking for places for us to eat for our anniversary. A SkyWing stopped me and t-told me that I wasn't welcome there."

Umber didn't tell the full story on purpose, hoping that Flame wouldn't press any further, but Umber's fear came true and he did.

"Why? Is it because you're a MudWing? Is it because you don't look expensive enough? Is it because you're..." he trailed off and realized what had happened. The look on Umber's face confirmed this. "Umber...you can't listen to dragons like that." He wrapped his wings and arms around him. Umber started feeling better with the warmth of Flame all around him.

Flame was the only dragon whose touch could make him feel so much better. Except for Turtle of course, whose touch could probably make anyone feel better.

Flame wanted to ask who the SkyWing was and where it happened so that he could go over there and set him on fire. He remembered all the times he had wanted to do that in the past year but stopped himself before he could ask. He was trying to be better.

They both sat there for a couple of minutes and Umber was feeling a lot better now that Flames wings were wrapped around him like a cocoon.

"You feeling better now, Umber?" Flame said after a few minutes. "I mean I've had my wings wrapped around you for at least 30 minutes now," he joked.

"It's only been 20," Umber joked back with a muffled laugh. "You're the only dragon in the Pyrrhia that can be so nice and so mean at the same time," Umber said.

"I might just keep you like this forever because of that." Flame said with a laugh.

"Oh no you won't," Umber responded.

"Oh yes I will," Flame retorted.

They both started playfully fighting. Flame struggled to keep his wings around Umber when he started trying to shove his way out. Umber eventually was able to break free from Flame's wings, took a step back, and then tackled him to the floor. Flame's back bumped

the floor and made their whole bedroom shake.

Flame and Umber's eyes locked with Umber's. He gave him a quick kiss and then let him get up. These were the moments that Umber was grateful for Flame being in his life. These were the moments where he felt like he and Flame were the only dragons in the world. The only dragons that mattered.

"Clay should be here to visit you soon." Flame reminded him.

"OH I COMPLETELY FORGOT ABOUT THAT!" Umber exclaimed. "We need to clean up the place before he gets here!"

"Agreed," Flame smiled.

Sora's POV

Sora and Jet were both sleeping together in the same bed, snuggled up close. Zephyr was able to take the day off today because all of her patients were either out somewhere, sick, or straight-up refused to come.

They lived in a very nice house since Zephyr got paid very well because of how important her job was. It was a 2 story house with 2 bedrooms, a massive living room, and a very nice dining room. Their kitchen was no exception. The countertops were black and white colored marble and the floors were made up of black ceramic tiles. Zephyr's room was on the first floor while Jet and Sora's room was on the second floor.

Jet also had the day off today from working at the front desk. Since there were so many dragons and so much work, there were two receptionists now that worked for half the week. The other dragon was an IceWing. He and Jet almost never saw each other since they didn't work at the same time.

Zephyr had gotten home from work and went to check on Jet and Sora. She walked past the room and saw that they were still sleeping, cuddled up close with the blanket over them. The light was beaming through their window, reflecting off of each of their red and brown scales.

Zephyr walked into their room and ripped the blanket off from over the two of them. They both shot up and started complaining about it while Zephyr stood there with a grin on her face.

"You two should have been awake hours ago. Look at the sun! It's AT LEAST noon!" Zephyr complained.

They both shot up out of bed and bolted to the window.

"Oh my gosh, I didn't even realize how late we slept in!" Jet said. "Me and Sora were up all night doing..." she trailed off. Sora and Jet both looked at each other hesitantly. "Stuff."

Sora's face got bright red with embarrassment at this, wishing that Jet hadn't said anything.

"Look, I don't really care what you two do together, but you can't sleep in this late, your scales are going to start to get dull like a NightWings!"

It was a common myth that many SkyWings told their dragonets, trying to encourage them to sleep at night. NightWings were rarely seen when Jet was growing up but one distinct feature that everyone noticed though, was how dull their scales were.

"Mom, that's just a myth. That's never actually happened to any dragons before," Jet responded.

"That's because not a single dragon in the world sleeps in as late as you do," Zephyr said.

Jet did have some trouble falling asleep while growing up, but she thought that she couldn't be the only dragon in the world like this. She met plenty of dragons growing up that would stay up late and be tired whenever they had to wake up early.

A few minutes later, Sora and Jet both went downstairs and saw that Zephyr was already cooking them breakfast. Well, technically it was lunch for them and they both could immediately tell what she was making from the smell.

"Are you making us pancakes again?" Sora asked.

Pancakes were Sora's favorite thing to have in the morning. She tried them for the first time at the Healing Center and hasn't been able to stay away from them since. She especially liked the way Flame made them.

"You know, you don't have to make us breakfast, mom," Jet said.

Zephyr made them breakfast often. Sora liked the idea, but Jet saw it as her still babying her. Sora could never understand how someone couldn't enjoy someone else making them breakfast in the morning.

"But I want to! It gives me something to do in the morning if you two are awake. Besides, Sora loves pancakes!" Zephyr responded.

When Sora moved in, Zephyr already knew that Sora loved pancakes from all of their sessions together and she would try to make them for her as much as she could. Zephyr asked Flame to give her his recipe but she had to promise not to share it with anyone else. The only other dragon who knew his recipe was Umber.

"I guess so." Jet gave up on the argument since she was tired.

"Anyways, what do you want to do today, Jet?" Sora said. Sora knew Jet too well and could guess what she was about to say next.

"Sleep," they both said at the same time.

Sora looked at Jet and they both ended up laughing hysterically at this. It was especially funny to Sora.

"You know I hate it when you do that Sora!" Jet laughed.

"I know but you're just SO predictable!" Sora responded.

She did this often with Jet. Sora knew that she hated it and that's what made it so funny to her.

Kind of like Umber and Flame with that mud muffin stuff, she thought.

"Why don't we go and hang out with Flame and Umber today? They

are both so cute together!" Jet said. Sora shot her an unamused look.

"Well A, Clay is coming over to their house today to visit Umber, not to mention that they're both probably still out anyways setting things up," Sora explained. "And B, that's my brother you're talking about!" she finished.

"How is Flame and Clay by the way? Are they on good terms? I actually haven't seen them in the same room with each other since Umber introduced Flame to him," Jet questioned.

"Oh, they're great! Just last week Flame and Clay were talking about their anniversary," she responded.

"At least that's one dragon Flame hasn't managed to piss off yet," Jet said. "Besides, Clay is probably the last dragon you would want mad, especially when you're dating his brother. He probably wouldn't have time to deal with Flame anyways since he's helping at the Jade Academy."

They were both sitting at the table now, throwing pancakes into their mouths. Sora loved the way Zephyr made them and would always look forward to eating them. Probably not as much as Umber would enjoy eating them though. Umber would eat anything at any time. One thing that she didn't understand though, was how she was able to make them taste so much like Flames.

After they ate, they both decided that they would stay inside today and enjoy the little time left that Jet had off by relaxing since this was Jet's last day off.

Author's Note: I had a lot of fun writing this. I have so many plans for the future of this story (Note that this is NOT an official continuation of the original and is only my continuation). I can tell that I'm going to have a lot of fun developing some of the characters that were talked about at the end of the original Healed. This is my first time writing about...well...basically anything that I actually care for and I already have the plot and everything written out. Also, this wouldn't have been possible without the original author of the

first story's help. Check out their story before reading this one, the link is in my bio.

Chapter 1

Umber's POV

Flame left the room, taking a mental note of everything that needed to be cleaned. He looked around and saw the coffee table had graphicolls all over it from when they were practicing yesterday, the kitchen sink had dishes dirty dishes in it, there was a pot of old food from the day before, half-empty glasses of water on the kitchen table, and the few bags of decorations spilled on the floor from when he came in and heard Umber's sobs.

Umber walked out of the room and made the same observations that Flame did. He saw the bag of decorations scattered all over the floor and looked over at Flame.

"What are those for?" Umber said with a confused look.

"Oh, uh, my mom left those with me to hide from Chromis," Flame replied. "He's probably going to find them unless we hide them here." He finished with a laugh.

"So...where are we hiding all of that?" He questioned.

Flame and Umber's home was small and they'd never had to hide anything in their house before of course. What would they need to hide? He never even thought about hiding anything here before. They slept in the same bed, ate the same food, sat on the same couch, and spent most of their day together.

"We dont exactly have a mansion here, Flame," he said cheerfully. "We can't just leave all of this stuff on the floor, either. Our house is already cramped enough." he finished with a laugh.

"Oh don't worry. I already know where to put it," Flame remembered. "You remember that one space where the panel comes off the wall? Well, I figured we could just put it there. Chromis never comes over anyways so it wouldn't be hiding it more than it

would be just getting it out of the way."

All of this stuff for a one-year-old dragonets hatching day he thought. *They must really want to make this special.*

Umber never celebrated his birthday with his mom. It was just him, his brothers, and his sisters that all got him some prey. Sometimes they couldn't even celebrate each other's hatching day because of how much they were out at war.

The war... he remembered. The place where I watched Crane die. The thing that caused Sora to go berserk...the thing that made me and Flame cross paths. Would I have never met Flame if it wasn't for her? Would she do it again if she knew what my future held? Would I let her do it again if I knew what my future held...

"Anyways, I think we should probably get to cleaning before Clay gets here." Flame reminded him.

"Oh...yea we should probably get to that now," Umber said looking up and snapped himself out of deep thought.

Flame went over to the table with graphicolls spread out all over it, rolled each of them up neatly, put them in a box, and slid it under the table while Umber picked up the decorations and put each of them in their bag.

There were many different types of graphicolls spread out on the table, including many new ones that they bought over the last few years with some of the money Flame saved. Umber loved reading them with Flame. He wished he could read them with Flame forever if food didn't exist...or sleep.

He was walking over to the panel with the bags of decorations shifting and thumping all around inside the bags when he heard Flame speak up.

"So...who's doing the dishes?" He joked.

"Who insisted on making dinner last night, you goofball." Umber responded sarcastically. "I can do the dishes in the sink, but you're doing the pot."

Umber finished putting the decorations away, then walked over to the sink, grabbed the glasses of water on the way, and started washing them while Flame grabbed the dirty pot and dumped the dried food in the garbage.

"Gross," Umber said.

"What? Do you not like a little dried out, old sauce with your chicken?" Flame joked.

On the way over to the kitchen again, he kissed Umber on the cheek and set the pot on the polished wooden counter beside him.

"I can do the rest from here, Umber. Go sit down and we can practice reading once I'm done with this," Flame said.

"Love you," Umber whispered after kissing Flame back and then went to sit back down.

Once Flame finished the dishes, he went over to Umber and pulled the box out from under the table and after a while of rummaging through the endless amount of scrolls, he pulled out a graphicoll named "Aftermath of Lord Evil".

Flame had gone through the entire series with Umber over the last year. It took way longer for them to finish since Umber was still considerably slow at reading, but Flame didn't mind. He would read every scroll 10 times over if it meant he could spend more time reading with Umber.

They were about to start reading when they heard a familiar knock on the door. Umber immediately knew whose knock it was since he had heard it so often.

"That must be Clay!" Umber said with joy. He ran over to the door and opened it and standing there was a massive brown dragon almost twice the size of Umber. He had an innocent-looking smile on his face and Umber wondered how a dragon could be so intimidating yet so not-intimidating at the same time.

"Hey Umber!" Clay said, excited to see his brother.

At this point, Clay was bear-hugging him and it didn't take long for Clay to put him down because of his bad leg. He had a massive scar where Peril had dug her talons into the wound and he would have most certainly died if it wasn't for her. Umber remembered being so sad but so relieved when he heard what happened to Clay. He was insanely grateful for what Peril did. He may not have liked her at the time, but she instantly earned Umber's respect when he heard. On one talon, his brother would be limping in pain for the rest of his life but he was alive. On the other talon, the great war was finally over and no more of his brothers and sisters had to die for Queen Morheen. On the third talon, his favorite NightWing aside from Moon was still alive because of Clay.

Flame rushed over to help Clay when he put Umber down and started stumbling.

"Woah, hey, calm down there, Clay," Flame said, grabbing Clay's shoulders.

Grabbing his shoulders didn't do much because of how much bigger Clay was compared to Flame. He looked like an ant compared to Umber's brother.

"I guess I'm still not used to not being able to move around like I used to," Clay said.

There was a long pause while Umber and Clay smiled at each other.

"Anyways, come inside Clay! We haven't seen you in so long!" Umber said with excitement.

Flame's POV

"So, uh, you're anniversary...what's happening with that?" Clay said awkwardly.

Clay hadn't been around for a few weeks because things were getting hectic at the Jade Academy. He was able to write letters, but that was about the extent of it. He didn't have too much time to visit regularly as he did before so he didn't know much about the anniversary and Chromis's hatching day.

"Oh," Flame said, "Umber said he was going to do most of it while I helped with Chromis's hatching day party. He was actually out today setting it until..." he trailed off.

"Until what? What happened? Umber?" Clay shot a glare at Umber.

"Uhm..." Umber said hesitantly. "There was a SkyWing who I told about me and Flame..." he trailed off. "and he wasn't happy when he realized that me and Flame were...dating."

"Oh," Clay said quietly. "Do you...want to talk about it? I mean...you don't have to if you don't want to, Umber," he finished.

"No," Umber paused. "Uh, I mean it's fine..."

There was a long pause and Flame noticed that Umber was beginning to get uncomfortable. Judging by Clay's face, he noticed it too, so he tried to quickly change the subject.

"SO..." Flame interrupted. "Me and Umber are going over to my mom's today and we're going to start planning where we are going to celebrate Chromis's hatching day."

"Oh! Thats great!" Clay paused and realized something. "I...I won't be able to come though. The Jade Academy is under a lot of stress right now. A lot of changes are going through the school, and some of the students are really stressed out from it so we need to be there to answer questions and help everyone..."

This didn't surprise Flame, though. He could tell that Clay was stressed out by the way he was acting. It had been such a long time since Clay had come over, too, so he could definitely tell that there was something going on at Jade Academy. Despite all this, he still tried his best to come over and see his family. He knew Clay was strong, but he also knew that right now, he needed a break. Flame didn't know what to say though. He wasn't particularly good at speeches or giving advice.

"Clay," Umber finally spoke up. "I think you should probably take a break." he said sympathetically. "You know, from the Jade Academy. You've barely had any time for yourself and I know how

much you've wanted to visit us."

"I should, but I can't. It's not fair to everyone else if I take a break and leave them with more work." Clay paused. "I'm still going to try and visit you and Sora as much as I can though!" he said optimistically.

He's right... Flame thought. *It's not fair to everyone else if Clay is able to take time off and they can't. It's not like we can do anything about it, though. If he wants to keep working, we can't stop him.*

There was a long pause before Umber finally spoke up. "Hey, do either of you want anything from one of those markets? I'm gonna go to a few of them quickly, I'm STARVING!"

"You're always starving, Umber." Flame joked.

"Make that the both of us," Clay chimed in. "But no, I'm good Umber. I don't have any money on me anyways!" He finished.

"Clay. You're the reason I'm not dead. You're the reason we're ALL not dead! You're a dragonet of destiny! I think you AT LEAST deserve something to eat. Besides, you're my brother and I won't let you say no," Umber protested.

"Ugh, fine, you win," Clay said in a sarcastic tone.

Wow. Umber must love Clay a lot. I guess that brotherly-bond thing that MudWings have is real. Flame thought to himself.

When Flame was growing up, his mom never asked him if he wanted anything special. That is when he saw her, which wasn't often. He always thought that his mom never even loved him growing up. He thought this was confirmed when he got the scar on his face. He remembered hating that SandWing for what she did to him. For completely destroying his relationship with his mother, sending him away at every chance she could. After he confronted Stonemover, he realized how much his mom loved him. That's all he wanted for most of his life. That was until he met Umber, and everything changed.

"Flame?" Umber said, taking Flame's gaze from the floor to his eyes.

"Do you want anything?"

"Oh...uh no, no I'm fine," Flame said.

Umber gave him a quick kiss before leaving Clay and Flame alone together in awkward silence.

Once he was sure that Umber was gone, he looked up at Clay with a questioning glare.

"Clay, can I ask you something?" Flame said.

"Yea sure, Flame. What is it?" Clay responded.

"I want to make me and Umber something special for Chromis's hatching party," He paused. "But I don't know what to make. I'm torn between an apple pie or a chocolate cake. The first thing I ever made for him was an apple pie, but I'm sure he would like a chocolate cake more," he explained.

Clay looked up at him with a shocked face and Flame caught on to him quickly.

"What!? Can I not make a pie for the dragon I love?!" Flame said angrily.

"W-What? No!" Clay exclaimed "I'm just shocked by how much you've changed over the last couple years..." he said. "I-I mean, 2 years ago, you were trying to kill Stonemover...and now you can't decide between an apple pie or chocolate cake for one of the nicest dragons in Pyrrhia..."

"Yeah...I guess I have changed a lot. " Flame smiled, looking back down at the floor.

He remembered how hostile he used to be...how mean he used to be to everyone around him. He hated the world and everyone in it because he thought everyone hated him equally. But after he met Umber, everything changed. Umber showed him love and acceptance, despite the fact that Flame was still hostile and distant. Slowly but surely, Flame began to let down his guard and open up to Umber. He learned to trust him and confide in him, and Umber

was always there for him, no matter what. As time went on, Flame realized how much Umber loved him. So much that he changed just to be with him. He began to see himself as worthy of love and happiness, and he started to let go of the anger and bitterness that had consumed him for so long. These were the reasons he loved Umber.

"So, apple pie or chocolate cake?" Flame reminded Clay.

After a minute of thinking, Clay carefully came to a decision.

"Apple pie, definitely. Umber is a sucker for sappy-romantic stuff," Clay finally decided.

Flame thought this was a good option, but did Umber? All he wanted to do right was make Umber happy.

He would be happy no matter what. As long as we're together... Flame quickly realized.

Umber's POV

Umber walked towards the markets, his eyes scanning the various stalls and their wares. The smells of various spices, meats, and vegetables wafted toward him and he took a deep breath, enjoying all the different smells. He had never seen so many different types of food in one place before and he was excited to try it all, but he couldn't. He had to save his money to get something for Clay.

As he made his way towards one of the stalls, he noticed that there were several dragons crowded around it, eagerly sampling the food. Umber finally made his way to the front of the line and began to sample some of the food himself.

This stall had an assortment of stews, soups, and kebabs. He threw one of the kebabs in his mouth and instantly knew what he was going to get.

What would Clay want though? he thought to himself. *I feel like he might like one of the stews here. Let's see...* he paused and slowly read one of the options, sounding each of the words out in his head. *P-O-T-A-T-O S-T-E-W...Oh! Potato stew! He'll love that!*

Umber ended up buying a few kebabs and 2 bowls of potato stew for Clay and he started home. While he was flying back, he couldn't help but smile to himself whenever he thought of Clay. His legendary brother! A Dragonet of Destiny! He wished he could do more for him, though. He spent most of his life without Clay and they were only reunited a little under 3 years ago when he escaped the mountain.

A little under 3 years ago... he paused. *When Crane died. I watched her die. I watched her die and I couldn't do anything. If only Clay made it back sooner. Then maybe...maybe things would be different.* He thought but then realized something. *Things would be different. I would have never met Flame or Jet and me and Sora would probably be back at the Jade Academy together and Flame would still hate everyone around him.*

He spotted their house and started flying down as he approached it. He listened to the dragonets play on the gravel path by the multiple trees that were lined in between the houses. Their neighborhood was nothing special though. They always heard these dragonets playing outside together. It usually consisted of 2 SkyWings, a SandWing, an IceWing, and sometimes a small, green SeaWing. Umber and Flame almost never talked to the other neighbors since they were mostly out doing things together but he still enjoyed listening to the kids having fun without needing to worry about the war anymore.

Umber finally landed on the path near their house and went inside. Flame and Clay were talking about Sora and Jet, about how they first met, and how they got together.

"Hey!" Umber said when he walked into the house. "Glad to see you two don't totally hate each other already. I haven't left you two in a room since I told Clay about me and you, so...at least you're still alive!" Umber joked. "Oh also, Clay. I got you a couple of bowls of potato stew if that's alright."

"Oh Umber, you shouldn't have gotten me two bowls. I don't want you spending so much on me! You still have an anniversary to plan!" Clay said.

"Clay, one bowl of stew isn't going to ruin my plans completely," Umber protested.

"I've got to go visit Sora soon, so I'm going to eat these here then I have to go. I'd stay longer, but everyone at the Jade Academy are waiting," Clay explained.

Clay finished eating his stew at the table while getting into some last-minute conversations before he finished and left. They talked about most of the things that they've done in the last few weeks that Clay hasn't visited, what they thought they should do for Chromis's birthday, and teased each other about the anniversary.

"Alright, I should get going and leave you two love-dragons alone for now," Clay paused "OH! Before I forget. Umber, I wanted to give you something."

Clay then pulled a necklace out from his wing. The necklace had a sleek silver chain with a sizable brown-looking gem in the middle of it. He turned it around in his talons and the sun reflected on the crystal clear gem shooting brown streaks of light on the floor.

"For me?" Umber said gratefully. "I-I mean, where did you get that? Did you find it? Did you buy it? I really hope you didn't buy that for me! It looks so expensive!"

"It was a gift from one of the students at the Jade Academy," Clay explained. "They said they found it in one of the underground pools and that it matched perfectly with my scales. I thought that you would probably want it more than me, especially since I sit in a cave all day, and you walk around town all day."

"Umber, put it on! I want to see it on you!" Flame exclaimed.

Umber carefully took the silver chain out of Clay's talons, being careful not to smudge or drop the gem in the middle. Umber suspected that it might be some sort of brown topaz. He carefully lifted it up and over his head and dropped it on his neck. The crystal itself got stuck on Umber's snout when he was putting it on so he had to take it off and clip it on instead.

"That looks perfect on you, Umber!" Clay said.

Flame leaned in for a kiss while Clay stood there with a smile on his face as he watched them. Clay always only wanted what was best for Umber so watching him be with the person he loved is all he wanted. He was hesitant about Flame and Umber at first, but when he realized how much Flame changed, he was sure that Flame wasn't just using Umber.

"All right, well, I should be going now," Clay interrupted.

They both looked up, said their goodbyes, and Clay opened the door and shot into the sky, slowly getting smaller in the distance as they watched. Umber dangled the necklace in his talons while he watched Clay fly away in the direction of Sora's house, grateful for having such a good brother.

Chapter 2

Flame's POV

They both stood there for a few minutes, looking at the necklace that Clay left for Umber. Flame was holding the necklace in his talons, admiring its beauty. The silver chain glimmered in the bright sunlight and the brown gem sparkled around Umber's neck. It was the perfect shade of brown and it matched Umber's scales almost perfectly.

"Hey, at least *now* I look expensive," Umber joked.

"You'll always look expensive to me," Flame said affectionately with a smile forming on his face. Umber gave him the same expression back.

He took Umber's talons in his and brought him inside. Sometimes, Flame thought about how he would be without Umber. Umber made him feel whole. Without him, he imagines that he would be dead, or everyone wishes he would be dead anyways, so he might as well be.

Once they were inside, Flame let go of Umber's talons and sat down at the table where they were reading before Clay showed up.

"Do you want to keep reading, Umber?" Flame asked.

"Oh, sure! We didn't exactly start reading in the first place, though," Umber responded.

Umber walked over to the table and sat down next to Flame. He leaned next to him and Flame felt the warmth of his scales against his.

The way Flame would teach Umber now that he could read, was by letting him read himself and point out any words he got wrong or couldn't figure out. Umber enjoyed the way Flame taught him but

Flame figured he would enjoy any way he taught him, as long as they had each other.

"*After the defeat of Lord Evil, the dragon heroes c-celeb...*" Umber stuttered out. He was having trouble reading the word and took a minute, trying to sound it out in his head.

"Celebrated," Flame finally spoke up.

"I was totally about to say that!" Umber said

"*Sure* you were," Flame chuckled.

Umber made a sarcastic scoff and continued reading.

"*They threw a giant party for the whole city as part of the c-celebration. Most of the town showed up. They were praised as the heroes of the town...*"

Flame was staring at Umber, smiling with his palm on his cheek while he read and started getting lost in his handsomeness. The sun was beaming through the window, making Umber's brown scales shine even brighter than before. The rustling of the scroll, the way he spoke as he slowly stuttered out words, the dragonets playing outside, all fading away as he admired him.

Every move Umber made only made Flame love him even more. He loved the way he would sound out each word, the way his tail would sometimes flick in excitement, the way his gaze was so focused on reading, the way he leaned against him, the way he kissed... To think how easily he could have missed out on all of this if he kept pushing Umber away.

After a few minutes of staring, Umber finally noticed his gaze.

"Flame...? Flame...? FLAME!" Umber yelled, immediately pulling Flame out of the trance he was stuck in.

"Are you there?" Umber said.

"Oh, uhm, yea just...thinking," Flame said.

"Thinking about...?" he questioned.

"Uhm, just things," Flame said, avoiding the obvious answer.

"Flame, you were just sitting there staring at me for who knows how long, with your talons on your cheek, smiling," Umber paused with a moment of realization. "You were checking me out, weren't you?"

Flame began profusely blushing and started stuttering out words.

"Oh I-I-uh, I wasn't...uhm..."

"Oh don't worry you giant goofball!" Umber interrupted. "I'm just joking with you!"

He gave Flame a quick kiss and then stood up, rolled the scroll up, put it back in the box, and tucked it back under the table.

"I thought we were reading?" Flame said in a confused tone.

"You can't even keep your eyes on the scroll," Umber pointed out. "Besides, we need to get cleaned up to meet up with Avalanche anyways."

"You mean YOU need to get cleaned up," Flame protested. "I saw you in that mud puddle earlier!"

"Well, I am a *MudWing*," he said. "and you haven't bathed in at least 3 days!" he protested back.

"We can agree to disagree," Flame said.

There was a river behind their house that seemingly flowed downstream forever. Whenever Flame and Umber went to the river, they almost always saw dragonets playing in the water. There were a few times when they were approached by the dragonets and were asked questions about their relationship. Questions like how they met, how long they've been together, and such. They were always happy to answer the questions since the dragonets seemed to be only two to three years old and have probably never seen anything like it before.

Something Flame noticed quickly is that a male/male relationship isn't something seen very often. Especially when that male/male relationship is intertribal. In the 2 years he's been with Umber, he has only seen a similar relationship a few times. He sometimes wonders if they're the only dragons like this in the Sky Kingdom. Except for Sora and Jet, of course.

They ended up going back to the river and the sun was reflecting off of the perfectly clear water. The streams water was flowing considerably slow today, making it perfect for young dragonets to swin in. There were a few dragonets in the river that were mostly SeaWings, but there were a few SkyWings and MudWings as well. Umber went in first and ended up having to pull Flame in with him after he felt the water and started complaining about it being too cold.

They splashed around in the river for a bit before getting out and drying off in the hot sun, laying next to each other on the grass.

"We should probably get going soon," Flame suggested. "Simoom can't babysit Chromis forever."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Umber agreed. "Avalanche is going to have to start paying extra for the amount of time she babysits him," he joked.

Umber and Flame both stood up and took off into the air heading straight towards the place Avalanche and Shrimp told them they would be.

Umber's POV

They were in the air now, flying high above the clouds. Flame had been getting better at flying slower and staying at Umber's pace. They would always talk about the different kinds of trees and plants they caught a glimpse of sometimes while flying.

"Think fast, MudWing!" Flame said and quickly barreled towards Umber.

What is he-

Before he could finish his thought, Flame took him out of the sky and he was now in a freefall with Flame on top of him. His red wings were fully wrapped around Umber's body already and he could feel the wind all around his face. Adrenaline was pumping through his veins as they locked eyes. Flame gave him a mischievous grin for a few seconds before Umber knocked him off and opened his wings, leaving Flame to fall about one-hundred more feet before he opened his wings as well and quickly caught up to Umber. They were now significantly closer to the ground than they were before Flame decided to pull that stunt.

"That wasn't fair!" Umber exclaimed once Flame was close enough to hear him. "I didn't even get time to react!"

"Life's not fair MudWing, you'll live," he grinned.

"I am so going to get you back for that!" Umber said playfully.

"Oh yeah? Well, we'll see about that," Flame chuckled.

After a little while of flying in silence, Umber noticed that they were nearing the point where they agreed to meet Avalanche. There was a grassy patch in the middle of a forest beside a massive lake. The water was blue, but cloudy at the same time. There were beautiful flowers and bushes all around the lake. There were also loads of SeaWings, MudWings, and SkyWings all swimming together. They could both hear the echoes of splashing, laughing, and sometimes even roaring from the lake from all the way up in the sky.

They ended up spotting Avalanche under one of the trees who was reading a scroll. They both slowly descended towards her before finally landing in the grassy patch a little ways away from her.

After they landed, the two began walking towards Avalanche. She ended up spotting them before they got over to her and smiled. They both wondered where Shrimp was, but they soon got their answer when he shot out of the water behind them and glided down towards Avalanche after noticing them.

When he landed, he opened his wings and shook them off. The

water went everywhere and got all over Avalanche and drenched the scroll in her talons. Flame and Umber couldn't help but laugh while seeing this.

"SHRIMP!" Avalanche yelled. "WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?!"

"Sorry," Shrimp apologized.

She threw the soaking-wet scroll down in anger.

"Well now that's ruined," she scoffed.

By now, Flame and Umber finally reached Avalanche and could see the water dripping from her scales and the scroll, which was now a sloppy mess in the grass.

"So, what do you think we should do?" Flame said, trying to ignore what happened.

"I thought you were going to have some ideas," Avalanche said while wiping the water off her face.

"Well, we were kind of busy today," Umber pitched in. "I mean, we cleaned the house, Clay came over, and Flame almost drove me into the ground on the way here."

"I did not!" Flame protested. "You know I wouldn't do that!"

Avalanche noticed the silver and brown necklace around Umber's neck at this point and her attention immediately shifted to it.

"Where'd you get that, Umber?" Avalanche pointed at the necklace, interrupting them.

"Oh, this?" he said, lifting the brown gem on the necklace. "It was a gift from Clay. Apparently, one of the students at Jade Mountain gave it to him and he gave it to me instead."

"It looks pretty...and expensive. Are you sure someone at Jade Academy just *gave* it to him?" Avalanche asked.

"I mean, I guess," Umber paused. "He didn't steal it if that's what

you're trying to say. I know Clay and he wouldn't do that," he finished with an unamused look.

"I'm just saying, you never know when it comes to dragons," Avalanche explained.

"Okay, let's get to discussing where to celebrate, you two," Shrimp interrupted.

There were a few moments of silence until Flame spoke up.

"What if we kept it simple and celebrated it at our place?" he said.

"Your place is far too small for us and Chromis's friends," Avalanche reminded him.

Umber tried to imagine fitting all those dragons and dragonets in their house. The more he thought about it, the less likely it seemed to become.

That many dragons. They would never be able to fit in our house. Even if they did, there wouldn't be enough room for them to play around. Umber thought. *They probably wouldn't even be in our house most of the time. They would probably be outside playing in the river anyways.*

"What if we went to that one island? You know, Flame's favorite place in all of Pyrrhia," Umber said. "We go there all the time whenever we want to get away from...well everything," Umber suggested.

"That's too long of a flight for a SeaWing, like Chromis," Flame said.

"He's half SeaWing half SkyWing," Umber said. "Shouldn't he be able to fly long distances?"

"He has the wings of a SkyWing but has the stamina of a caterpillar Umber," Flame joked.

There was another moment of silence while everyone thought of ideas.

"Oh! I know!" Shrimp said, breaking the silence. "What if we go to

the beach? There would be plenty of space for Chromis to fly around and swim!"

"Are you just saying that because *you* want to swim, or because you actually think it's a good idea?" Avalanche said.

"Actually," Umber spoke up. "I think that would be great for Chromis! Me and Shrimp could play underwater with him while you two...can do whatever you two want to do."

"I'm glad you could come up with such an original idea like that," Flame commented sarcastically.

"Well, I'm sure Chromis would want to go to the beach, so, majority wins," Umber said.

"I guess that settles it then," Avalanche said. "We're going to the beach."

They all took off and started flying in the direction of the beach, leaving the behind the screams of joy from young dragonets.

After a while of flying, they eventually found the beach. The water was shallow enough near the shore for younger, non-SeaWing dragonets. Shallow enough to the point where the water would probably only go up to Clay's neck. There were more adult dragons and dragonets playing in the water and Umber guessed that many of the older dragons were probably the younger dragonet's parents. Some of them were splashing with the older dragons, some seemed to be playing with other dragonets, and some were on the beach, probably watching their dragonet swim. Umber could see that there were loads of SeaWings on the floor of the ocean, sleeping and looking up at all the others.

"We should probably find a more secluded area than this," Avalanche said. "Chromis doesn't like playing with dragonets he doesn't know."

Chromis wasn't very good at making friends, so he didn't often like to hang out with other dragonets outside of his small friend group. His friend group consisted of a two-year-old SeaWing named

Atlantic and a one-year-old NightWing named Endwatcher. Chromis would play with them all the time and it was probably one of his favorite things to do besides swimming. Sometimes, they would play a game where Chromis and Atlantic dove in the water and would tell Endwatcher to come catch them. Umber watched this happen more than once and he has never seen the NightWing catch either of them before.

They started flying up the beach more until the distant echoes of dragons and dragonets went silent.

The water was shockingly clear on the beach. It was clearer than it was before which Umber thought was odd. The light reflecting off of the water was fading as the sun was slowly lowering into the horizon. They could smell the sharp smell of salt water and could hear the waves crashing against the sand at similar intervals each time. If you looked out, the water seemed to stretch away forever.

I wonder what's on the other side. Maybe another continent? Ooh! Maybe more food! Umber thought

Umber's talons sank into the soft, golden sand as he landed, causing many different multicolored shells to fly in the air. The sound of the crashing waves was even louder now, and the smell of salt water was even stronger than before. Umber sighed in relief as he felt the wind along the shore against his scales, immediately making him want to fall over and lay in the sand forever. He could also hear the many different seagulls squawking in the air above him. He thought about going back in the air and grabbing one as a snack for a moment, but then decided not to and finally fell over into the sand, exhausted after a long day.

After a moment, he stood up and started looking around the beach, admiring its beauty. He looked down at the necklace that Clay gave him and realized there was sand all over it. Quickly and gently, he started brushing the sand off of it in fear that it might get scratched.

"So, this is the place we're celebrating it?" Umber asked.

"Yep," Avalanche said, plunging a stick into the sand. "This is the place. Let's just hope that nobody else is here when we celebrate."

"UGH FINALLY," Flame exclaimed. "I'M EXHAUSTED! Can we go home now? I just want to go to sleep!" he finished, falling into the sand just like Umber had done.

"Yes, Flame. You and Umber can *finally* go home now," Shrimp said sarcastically.

"Thank the moons!" Flame responded.

Flame began walking over to Umber. He was about to take off before Flame stopped him and gave him a concerned look.

"Umber," Flame said. "I know that you're going to try and go back to planning tomorrow and I think you should probably take a break from it. I mean, you've been at this for the last week! You must be exhausted after doing it everyday."

"But Fla-" Umber said before getting cut off.

"No, no buts. You need a break, especially after what happened today. I know you want to make this special, but I also think you need to relax a little bit."

Umber gave him a hesitant look but ended up reluctantly agreeing, trying to respect his wishes.

"*Fine*," Umber agreed. "but as soon as this party's over, I'm going right back out there and finishing it. Also, when did you start becoming such a sap?" he questioned

"I become a sap when *I need* to become a sap," Flame said.

Umber huddled Flame closer to him with his wing and gave him a soft kiss.

"I think we should get going home now then," Umber said affectionately, lifting his wing from Flame's side.

Flame nodded his head in agreement and they then both took off after a running start, heading in the direction of the Sky Kingdom.

While they were in the air, Umber looked over at Flame with a

distrusting look. Flame noticed this after a few minutes and looked back over at him.

"Don't worry, MudWing. I'm not going to "*almost drive you into the ground*" again," Flame smiled.

"You better not. You scared me half to death last time," Umber said.

"You know I would never want to hurt you, Umber." Flame responded.

"Yeah, I know you would never *want* to hurt me," Umber said. "but that doesn't mean you *can't* hurt me."

There was a pause.

"Fine," Flame agreed. "no more driving you into the ground, alright?"

"Sounds good," Umber said.

After a while of flying, they finally spotted the Sky Kingdom in the distance. The sun was down, and the moons were up at this point. It was lit up with many candles along the fronts of houses that would later be put out. In Umber's experience, it probably wouldn't be long until then. All he wanted to do right now was collapse in his bed next to Flame. And of course, get something to eat before then.

After a little longer, they could see their house in the distance. Their street was silent and empty, only being lit by the few candles that were still lit. The dragonets that were playing outside earlier were inside now, probably sleeping by this time if Umber were to guess.

As they got closer, Umber could hear the river behind their house. He always found the sound of the river behind their house calming whenever it was the only thing separating them from complete silence. You couldn't hear the river in the house, but sometimes, Umber wishes he could.

They finally landed on the path in front of their house. Umber rushed in and Flame followed soon after.

Once he was inside, he walked into the kitchen, lit a candle, and started looking for something to eat. Eventually, he found some biscuits wrapped up in a bag and started eating them, getting crumbs all over the floor.

"Geez, Umber. You look like you haven't eaten in days," Flame said who was now sitting on the couch.

"It feels like it," Umber said with his mouth full of the dry biscuits. "These biscuits are really dry."

"Well obviously they're dry. They've probably been in that bag for *days* now," Flame said.

Umber was already pouring himself a cup of water and started chugging it. Once he was finished gulping down the glass of water, he went straight back to eating the biscuits.

"Umber, I'm going to sleep soon. Are you coming or are you going to keep eating those biscuits like a hungry scavenger?" Flame said.

"Mfhm," Umber said with his mouth full, eventually swallowing the biscuit in his mouth. "Just give me a minute," he finished after a few seconds of struggling to get the biscuits down.

Flame started to walk in the direction of their bedroom and Umber lost sight of him once he went through the doorway, being engulfed by the darkness.

He threw the bag in the garbage, put the glass of water in the sink, and blew out the candle before finally making his way into their bedroom.

Through the darkness, he could make out Flame's figure, laying in their bed waiting for him.

He made his way over to him and laid down next to him. They hugged each other close and shared the warmth of their scales. Umber closed his eyes and eventually drifted to sleep.

Authors note: I've probably spent the longest on this chapter trying to get it just right. I've edited it a lot and I think that it's

been improved a bunch from what it was originally. So far, I'm having a lot of fun working on this. Also, I'll be doing these on my own from now on without Sandshadow's help which I'm excited for. I did this because they have a lot to do currently that they obviously enjoy and reviewing my stuff was taking time out of it, so I thought it would be best to start taking a lot more time to proof read my stories. Anyways, I hope you enjoyed this. If you have any questions, suggestions, or want to chat about Healed 2 you can message me on discord at Amisgal#8679.

Chapter 3

Flame's POV

5 days later, the day before the party.

Flame opened his eyes to the bright, morning light beaming through the window. He could hear the screams and roars of young dragonets playing outside. He always loved waking up to it since it made him feel good knowing that they had a better dragonet-hood than he did.

As his eyes adjusted to the light, he could make out the bumps on the popcorn ceiling above him. Sometimes when Flame had trouble falling asleep, he would look up and count each of the tiny dots on the ceiling until he dozed off. It usually worked, but sometimes it didn't and he would have to wait out his energy until he was tired enough to go to sleep. One thing that encouraged him to sleep though, was the thought of seeing Umber the next day, conscious and moving around.

He turned his head, now looking over at Umber while he peacefully slept. He took a glance at his neck and realized that his necklace was gone. Quickly, he popped his head up and looked past Umber's shoulder and saw it sitting on his nightstand. The chain was carefully placed down as if it was on display. The brown gem rested on the wood, sparkling as it usually did whenever light dared to touch it.

He tried getting up and realized that he had his wing around Umber still and was surprised that he hadn't moved it all night. It was a habit of his to wrap his wings around him. He loved doing it since it always made Umber feel better, and it made him feel closer to him.

He gently lifted his wing, trying not to wake Umber up so that he could make him breakfast in bed. Umber would never let him so he always had to wake up before him to do it.

He slowly got up out of bed and walked to the door. He had done this so many times that he knew exactly where every single creaky floorboard on his side of the room was by heart. Step by step, he made his way to the door, missing every floorboard on the way, and successfully made it without a sound. He closed the door gently and walked to the kitchen, trying to think of the things he would make Umber.

Eggs? No, too easy. Pancakes? Nah, too generic, he thought. After a moment of thinking while standing at the door, he finally figured out what he would make. *What if I make him those breakfast burritos? I've never made him that before! And we have the ingredients!*

Walking through the living room now, he looked around and wondered why it was so clean. Last night, the living room was a mess with graphicolls scattered on the table, bowls of food on the couch, and crumbs all over the hardwood floor.

Umber must've cleaned it before getting in bed last night, Flame thought. *He did come in pretty late.*

Last night when Umber came to bed, Flame was already half asleep and hardly recognized that Umber snuggled up next to him. That's when he habitually put his wing around him. It was like an instinct to him whenever he was close to him; an instinct that screamed

Keep. Umber. Safe.

He was in the kitchen now and started washing his talons in the sink. He took out a pan, a bowl, a whisk, salt, and pepper from the cupboard. He then opened the fridge and took out eggs, sausage, avocados, salsa, tortillas, and butter and then set them all down on the countertop neatly.

The fridge was a clever design that had a block of ice at the bottom, surrounded by some sort of insulating material that kept it cold. The block of ice only needed to be replaced once every couple of weeks and was extremely cheap, which Flame was grateful for. Things that needed to be frozen would go near the bottom and things that needed to be kept cold would go near the top. He often wondered what he would do without something like this.

He cracked enough eggs for two burritos into the bowl and whisked them and set the pan on the stove at the same time. He turned the handle and blew out a small plume of flames to light the stovetop. The stove lit and immediately began to heat the pan.

He scooped out some butter and added it to the pan and started crumbling the sausage in his talons as he watched the butter melt. Once he was done and the butter was melted, he threw it in the pan and watched until it got brown and crispy.

He added the eggs to the sausage in the pan and mixed them in once he was sure the sausage was cooked enough. He stirred them and mixed them until the eggs were fully cooked and the sausage were little brown chunks in the eggs.

He looked over at the tortillas, grabbed one carefully, and threw it in the air with a spinning motion as if he was tossing pizza dough and blew a tiny bit of fire in the air, perfectly warming and cooking the tortilla. He did it again and now had two perfectly cooked tortillas. He had done this so many times in the past that it was muscle memory to him now and he could pull this trick off perfectly every time. Umber was amazed by how exact his movement was whenever he did this in front of him.

He took a plate out of the cupboard and laid the slightly charred tortillas flat on it and started scooping the cooked sausage-scrambled egg mixture into the middle of each of them.

He went over to the avocados and started slicing them into thin slices with his talons. He took the avocados and spread the slices evenly on top of each of the piles of egg and sausage on each tortilla.

He looked over at the salsa, grabbed it, and started carefully pouring it on top of the avocado, eggs, and sausage before folding in the sides of the tortilla and rolling it up tight. He did this one more time and they were ready to serve to Umber.

He grabbed the plate and started walking towards their bedroom. Right before he got to their door, Umber came walking out, yawning, and almost bumped into Flame and knocked the plate of

burritos out of his talons.

His necklace was on and brighter than ever in the morning light that was beaming through the windows. The brown gem clinked and clanked against the silver chain when he abruptly stopped. Immediately, Umber grabbed onto the gem so it didn't scratch.

"Umber!" Flame exclaimed in a surprised tone. "Get back in bed! I made you breakfast for you!"

"Flame, you know I hate it when you wake up early just to make me breakfast!" Umber said. "I can find something to eat mys-" he trailed off when he finally smelled the burritos and his eyes locked onto the plate full of food.

"On second thought, I can get back in bed if you really want," he said with excitement in his eyes.

"Nah, it's fine," Flame said. "You've already seen them now anyways. I wanted it to be a surprise."

"O-Okay," Umber said. "I guess I'll just be taking these then," he said hesitantly, looking over at Flame waiting for a nod of approval.

"Wha-, oh, yea take 'em," Flame said. "I made them for you anyways."

Umber took the burritos and sat on the couch, still admiring how good they looked. He took a massive bite of one of them and could taste the blend of the many different flavors. He could taste the blend of avocado, salsa, egg, and sausage. Once he finally finished his first bite of the burrito, he looked up at Flame who was watching intently.

"So, do you like it? I haven't made you that before and I thought I would since we had the ingredients and I assumed you wouldn't mind if I use-"

"OF COURSE I LIKE IT!" Umber interrupted. "This is probably one of the best things you've ever made for me! Why haven't you made this sooner?!"

Flame didn't know what to say, so he just smiled instead, hoping it was a good enough response.

Umber eventually took his second bite of the burrito, except his second bite was his last bite of the first burrito. He liked the first bite so much that he stuffed the rest of it in his mouth, getting little crumbs of egg and sausage all over the table.

"You're cleaning that," Flame said.

"What's the point of having a SkyWing boyfriend if he can't clean up my mess?" Umber joked.

They both looked at each other with straight faces for a few seconds before bursting out into an uncontrollable laugh at the same time. After a few minutes, they both calmed down.

"Seriously though, you're cleaning that," Flame said.

"Yeah, yeah, hold on. Let me finish this first," Umber said.

Umber continued eating the second burrito, digging his talons into each side of the wrap while shoving it down his maw. It had only taken him a few bites before the second burrito was completely gone. He picked the plate up and licked it clean of all the things that fell out before.

He looked over at all of the other crumbs of egg on the table and swiped them into his palm with one fluid motion. He made his way over to their garbage in the kitchen and quickly dumped the pile in his palm into it.

"We've still got a couple hours before we leave to go visit Sora," Flame said. "You wanna read?"

"Oh! Sure! We didn't even get the chance to read yesterday and we were just getting to the good part!" Umber smiled.

They walked over to the living room table and Flame pulled out the box of graphicolls from underneath. He opened the box and grabbed the same graphicoll they were reading yesterday and spread it out across the table. They started reading from where they

left off before.

The dragonets were playing outside, the sun was shining through the window as usual, and Umber's calm, soothing voice was reading. At this moment, he felt like his life was perfect. Like this is where he should've been all along. Like nothing could separate them now.

Umber's POV

A few hours later, they were both sitting on the couch leaning against each other, enjoying the warmth of their scales in silence. Flame would always gently caress his talons against Umber's back whenever they were huddled together like this and Umber loved it. It gave him a strange sense of extreme calm.

They had finished reading about an hour ago at this point. This is what they had been doing for the last half hour, cuddling and almost sleeping. They did this often when they didn't have much of anything else to do. They both loved it and would find any excuse to put things off to do it.

"C'mon Umber," Flame said in a soft voice, breaking the silence. "We've got to go."

"Just five more minutes," Umber pleaded, half asleep on Flame's shoulder.

After a moment of silence, Umber suddenly heard something that would pull him out of his drowsiness almost instantly.

"Wake up, *mud muffin*," Flame said.

He took a moment to process the words that had come out of Flame's mouth for a moment before immediately shooting his head up, almost uppercutting Flame with his horns.

"Flame! You know I hate it when you call me that!" Umber exclaimed.

"It worked, didn't it?" Flame said. "I woke you up, so we can leave now before we're late."

"Gah! I guess you're right," Umber said.

They both walked outside and saw the dragonets from earlier outside, playing some sort of game that included throwing a ball at each other.

Dodgeball maybe? Umber thought. *Maybe dodgeball ta-*

His thought was cut off when out of nowhere, one of the balls came hurling towards him and hit him in the face. He stumbled a bit but didn't fall over thanks to his massive build and the fact that over time in the war, he learned to take hits. Of course, a ball probably wouldn't even phase him normally, but he wasn't expecting it.

Immediately, the young SeaWing who threw it came running over to them and started profusely apologizing.

"Oh my gosh. I'm so sorry! I'm so, so, so sorry! I didn't mean to hit you!" the little green SeaWing said.

"Oh-, uh, it's fine," Umber said. "You learn to take a hit or two when you're in war-"

Oops... He thought. *Probably shouldn't be mentioning the war around dragonets this young.*

"Uh, sorry...I probably shouldn't have said anyth-"

"You were in the war?!" the SeaWing interrupted. "That's so cool! I wish I was in the war!"

"No! No you don't," Umber exclaimed. "Trust me. My brot- I mean Cla- I mean the Dragonets of Destiny ended it for a reason."

Flame looked over and him and shot him a look that Umber could only decipher to mean "Shut up!"

Umber could see the realization in the dragonet's eyes and realized he screwed up. He talked with their neighbors a few times before, but never got into the war and that his brother was a Dragonet of Destiny. He didn't want to be asked questions or to be praised or to be treated differently because of it, so he never would've said

anything anyways.

Oh no.

"Y-your brother is a Dragonet of Destiny!?" the SeaWing said. "I've heard so many stories about them! Do you have fireproof scales too? Does he ever visit you? Oh! Is it true that scary flaming SkyWing almost killed him?"

"Uhm-, no, yes, and not exactly?" Umber said. "I don't really want to talk about it right now..."

Umber thought of asking him to not say anything but he realized that it would be pointless. Why would a dragonet his age not tell his neighbors that his brother was a part of the Dragonets of Destiny?

Gah! Why did I have to say anything? Now I'm going to be constantly bombarded with questions from them, he thought. *Or maybe their parents will tell them not to? Maybe their parents will join in on asking... Flame, please do something.*

He knew it was unlikely Flame would be able to do anything in this situation, but he still hoped that he could come up with some sort of non-violent way of resolving this. He shot a look over at Flame to help him regardless

"Hey- uh... Why don't you go back and play with your friends?" Flame said politely. "And maybe don't say anything about this? Please?"

The little SeaWing nodded and began walking over to where the ball landed after hitting Umber and then back over to the group of dragonets. He watched them and saw that as soon as the SeaWing got back to the group, he called them all over and started whispering something and pointing at them.

"So much for that," Umber said. "Now they all know my brother is a Dragonet of Destiny and we'll be bombarded with questions about it."

"I did the best I could, Umber. Dragonets don't listen," Flame said.

"Well, you'll have to endure it with me at least," Umber said, looking over at the group of dragonets who were now walking over to them.

"I think it's time to go, Flame," he said, grabbing his talons and pulling him not far behind as he ran.

They both leaped in the air a few seconds later, leaving the group of dragonets behind at their doorstep. Umber looked back one last time and was shocked when he saw how many dragonets there were.

Wow, there are way more than I thought, he thought.

He counted at least 9 dragonets in the group that ran over. A couple SkyWings, SandWings, IceWings, and even RainWings, which surprised him.

Their home was getting further and further away at this point and Umber could feel the warm sun on his scales. The wind was blowing in his face and he started to feel a great sense of calm fall over him. All of his worries slowly faded away and soon enough, he completely forgot about what just happened.

Zephyr's house wasn't far, but flying was faster and that's what Umber preferred. Besides, they couldn't have walked if they wanted to be there on time. Those dragonets would have probably kept them there for hours asking them questions.

They could see Zephyr's house now after only a few minutes of gliding and occasionally flapping their wings. They lived on a street that was very peaceful and quiet. The gravel path was lined with some of the nicest houses Umber had ever seen before. Most of them had brown supports on each of the corners and around the door, while the rest of the houses were painted different colors like beige, blue, and some even red. They had always come to visit Sora whenever they had free time, but it still amazed Umber how nice their house was.

Sora, you're so lucky you're dating a rich dragon's daughter, he thought.

They landed on the gravel path only a few meters away from the house. They went over and knocked on the door a few times.

"I'M COMING!" a voice yelled from inside the house.

A few seconds later, the knob turned and the door opened, and standing there was Zephyr. She looked them up and down like she hadn't seen them in forever. Well, it had been a long time since Umber and Flame last visited. They both had been extremely busy all week and Umber was helping Flame with planning with his time off of planning himself.

Umber peeked inside past Zephyr and could see Sora and Jet on the floor, playing some sort of card game. There was a deck faced upside down and he could only guess that Zephyr was probably playing too. Umber never learned how to play many card games before. He thought it would be too complicated for him.

"Oh, hey you two! You're right on time! We were just wrapping this game up," Zephyr said. "I'm whooping their butts," she added with a whisper.

"Oh, uh, no thanks. I don't real-" Umber was cut off.

"UMBER!" Sora yelled, dropping her cards making sure that they were upside-down before running over to hug him. "I thought I'd never see you again! You haven't visited in so long!"

"Oh, yeah. We've been really caught up with Chromis's hatching party and stuff," Umber explained. "How's life? I mean, you live in such a big and nice house with the dragon you love for free!"

"Oh...uh yea," she hesitated. "I've been looking for a job recently since, you know, I can't exactly live here for free."

"Take as much time as you need, Sora," Zephyr said, who was still at the door with them.

"Anyways, come in! We were just finishing up this game!" Sora said.

"Oh, I uh-, I still don't know how to play any card games," Umber said.

"You don't know how to play UNO?" Sora mocked.

"Of course I know how to play UNO!" Umber said. "That's one of the easiest ones to understand."

UNO was one of the only card games that Umber knew how to play. It was simple enough for him to learn and one of the only card games he had ever had fun playing, assuming he knew how to play. Sora had taught him how to play other card games, but he quickly forgot once he lost. He never quite figured out where the name UNO came from, but he assumed it's probably something to do with numbers since that's what you're supposed to yell once you are down to your last card.

Umber and Flame both came inside. Their eyes took a minute to adjust to the dim light in the house but once they did, they could see just how beautiful it was inside. It was even prettier than he had imagined it last time. It had only been a few weeks and he went there often, so he was confused why

The floors...they look so much shinier, he thought. *And the couch, the walls, the windows. They all look so pretty.*

"Did you get this place remodeled or something?" Umber asked.

"Oh, yes!" Zephyr said. "We just had the walls painted a slightly darker shade and the floors had a fresh coat of polish put on them."

"What about the couch?" Umber asked. "Did you replace that or is my mind playing tricks on me?"

"I thought that too," Zephyr said. "The walls and floor must've brought the color out more."

After a minute, Sora noticed the necklace that Umber had on.

"Hey, where did you get that?" Sora asked.

"My necklace?" Umber said, "It was a gift from Clay. One of the Jade Academy students gave it to him apparently."

"It looks really nice on you," Zephyr added.

"Oh- uh, thanks," Umber said.

Umber and Flame both sat down on the couch, close next to each other. Zephyr sat down to where the lone set of cards was face down on the floor and picked them up. Zephyr's spot was right in front of the couch, so immediately Umber could see her deck. She only had a few cards that consisted of a red +4, a wild card, and a yellow 5.

Umber watched her as she threw down each of her cards, eventually getting down to her last card and yelling UNO. Needless to say, she won that game just as she said she was at the door. Once the game was over, Umber and Flame joined in and started talking about Chromis's hatching day, their anniversary, and Starf's birthday.

Flame and Jet had gotten along well. They joked and laughed and talked. Umber was hoping that someday soon they could consider each other friends.

"UNO!" Flame yelled, throwing down a card into the pile.

Umber looked intently at his deck. Flame had thrown down a red 9. Umber had 2 cards, a yellow 9 and a red reverse. He could win this for Flame, or lose it if he threw down his reverse and Flame didn't have a red. He could also just throw down his yellow 9 and call a UNO, too.

Hmmmm, he thought. *Screw it.*

He threw down the red reverse, going back to Flame. Everyone except Umber watched in dismay as Flame threw down his last card, a red 3.

"Umber! That's not fair!" Jet exclaimed. "You only did that because you're dating him!"

"You can't always win, Jet," Flame smirked.

"Gah! Whatever," Jet grumbled.

Umber looked around the room and saw that everyone was putting

their cards back in the pile to shuffle them again. He looked outside and saw the sun, high in the sky.

"It's been fun, but I think we should be going now," Umber said. "We have to go drop off the decorations with Avalanche and Shrimp and then cook a bunch of food for tomorrow."

"Aww, really?" Sora whined. "You can't play just one more game?"

"Nope. We're going to be late if we don't leave soon," Umber said. "They're probably at the beach waiting for us right now."

"Yeah, he's right," Flame agreed. "We're gonna be up late enough as it is making the food, so I want to get as much sleep as I can right now."

To make the food and make sure it was warm, they would have to either stay up most of the night or go to bed early and wake up in the middle of the night to start preparing the food. They also had to go shopping to get everything for the party. Luckily, Avalanche said she would give them the money to buy everything which was going to be a lot.

Umber and Flame both hugged everyone before walking to the door, opening it, and flying away.

They started flying back to their house which only took them a few minutes to get to. To their surprise, the dragonets from before were still outside, waiting for them to come back. Not all of the dragonets were there. Umber only counted 7 this time and the RainWings were gone.

Must be sun time for them, he thought.

"Let's just go through the back door this time," Flame suggested.

"And we should also loop around so they don't see us," Umber added.

They both immediately turned to the left and flew that way for a few minutes before turning to the right again, then again. They spotted their house but this time, they were behind it.

They flew low to the ground, trying not to grab the attention of the dragonets. They were still waiting for them out front, playing with the ball. Every now and again, they would look in the sky in the direction that Flame and Umber flew off. Eventually, they landed next to the river behind their house. Umber almost fell in, but Flame grabbed his talon before then.

"Thanks," Umber said.

"Can't let you walk in the house soaking wet," Flame said. "You'll damage our already damaged floors!" he joked.

Umber snickered a little at this and then started running towards their back door before the dragonets realized they were there. They swiftly opened the door and closed it shut behind them. They avoided all the windows so that they didn't see them walking around inside.

"We can't even walk around in our own home without having to sneak under every window!" Flame said angrily.

"Welcome to the life of being the brother of a Dragonet of Destiny," Umber said.

"Yeah, but I'm not Clay's brother," Flame said. "You're his brother, so why do I need to go through this?"

"You're dating me so you share the *fame* with me," Umber joked.

"Mhmm," Flame hummed. "Loving the fame so far," he said sarcastically.

Quickly, Umber went over to the secret panel in their wall, opened it, and grabbed the bags. He handed a few of them over to Flame who quickly checked everything inside.

"Let me see those," Flame said. "I need to check to see if everything's there."

Umber handed him the bags and he quickly dumped everything all over the floor. He started pointing at each decoration, probably marking things off of his mental checklist.

"Alright, let's go," Flame said. "Quickly, before they figure out we're in here!" he said after seeing Umber struggle to get everything back in his bags.

After a moment, he was able to get a good grip on each bag, sealing them shut with his talons so nothing could fall out mid-flight. They both raced out the back door, locking it behind them, and quickly jumped into the air.

They looked back to check on the dragonets one last time and they were still there, playing their ball game. Umber assumed that they hadn't even noticed that they were there since they hadn't stopped their game yet and were still peering up at the sky every few minutes. Umber sighed with relief at this realization.

They could see the beach in the distance. It was empty like before and the water was still as clear as it was the last time. The only difference now was that there were chairs, tables, and 2 big poles stuck in the sand where they had marked a few days ago.

They landed on the sand, sending tiny sand particles into the air. The yellow sand was warm and relaxing now that it was midday. Since Umber was on the sand now, he could tell that the area around the chairs and tables was clear of rocks and seashells.

They probably cleared them so that it would be easier to set everything up, he thought.

He began walking over to the tables, catching Avalanche and Shrimp's eyes. Once he got to the table, he set down the bags that were in his arms on it. The bags fell over and the decorations spilled all over the table.

"Oops," Umber said.

"It's fine," Shrimp said. "We have to take them all out anyways."

"O-oh, okay!" Umber said. "Is Simoom with Chromis right now?"

"Oh yea. She loves that dragonet," Avalanche said. "I bet she would babysit him for free if she could."

"We should go now," Flame said. "We've still got the shopping and cooking to do for tomorrow."

They were both about to take off when Avalanche stopped them.

"Wait!" Avalanche yelled, immediately stopping Flame and Umber in their tracks. "You're gonna need this," she said, holding out some money in her talons.

Flame ran over to her, kicking up sand on the way. Once he got over to her, she turned her talons over and let go of the gold coins, dropping them into Flame's.

"Thank you, Avalanche!" Umber said.

Flame nodded and ran back over to Umber and took off. Umber looked back and nodded to them both and swiftly followed. Once they were in the sky, Umber turned to Flame.

"Sooooo, what are we even making?" Umber questioned.

"I was thinking we could make cooked salmon, steak, chicken, ribs, and mashed potatoes," Flame said. "OH! And we need to get some raw fish for Shrimp. He hates anything that's cooked."

Umber looked at him with shock all over his face for a moment.

"What? Did I say something wrong?" Flame said.

"I-I knew we were going to be making a lot, but I didn't expect for us to be making a whole buffet!" Umber explained. "I thought we were just going to be making a few things. Like a couple steaks, a couple chickens, some sides."

"Well," Flame said. "I wanted to make my brother's first hatching party memorable."

"It will be!" Umber said. "But you don't need to do all of that for it to be!"

He paused and looked at Flame's face and realized there was no talking him out of this. The only thing he could do now was hope

that they got back early so they could get some sleep.

"Gah! Fine," Umber finally agreed. "We better hurry and get this stuff then!"

Judging by Flame's face, Umber could tell that this was the right answer. He wanted to make Flame happy and if this is what it would take this time, then he would do it.

After a couple of hours, they finally found all the ingredients, spices, and food that they were looking for. Once they got up to the counter, Flame pulled out the money that he was sitting in the shopping cart and gave it to the cashier. He had nowhere to hold the money, so he settled for the next best thing that wasn't trying to hold it in his wing the whole time.

They paid for everything and were given bags upon bags upon bags of the frozen and cold food and spices they had just bought. The bags were really heavy, so they split each one amongst each other. Umber took more bags than Flame since he was bigger and stronger.

Once they were outside, Umber tried jumping in the air to no avail. His legs felt like they would give out any minute now and his arms were no exception. The circulation was getting cut off so he dropped the bags down to his talons.

He gave another attempt and flew in the air, except this time he put everything he could into jumping. His legs lifted off of the ground and his wings started pounding as hard as he could get them to. Flame was off of the ground at this point and looked over at Umber, who he could tell was struggling to stay in the air.

"Give me a few of those bags, Umber," Flame said. "My wings are stronger and bigger than yours, so it should be easier for me to carry them."

Umber quickly handed over a few of the bags and he watched as Flame sank down a little bit with the extra weight, but eventually was able to fly back up.

Umber felt like he was floating at this point. Flame definitely had gotten some of the lighter bags and the bags he gave him were the ones causing him most of the struggle.

"See?" Flame said. "No problem. I can carry these until we get home, then you can carry them in the house."

"Thanks," Umber smiled.

Flame's POV

They started home. The flight was long because of all the weight of the bags and the fact his wings weren't SkyWing wings so Flame had to stay at his pace. He flew ahead a few times, but quickly slowed down and went back to Umber.

"You can always fly ahead, you know," Umber said. "You can get home before I do and not have to carry those anymore. You can leave them on the porch and I can take them inside."

"Yeah, but then I wouldn't be able to fly with my mud muffin," Flame said.

"Stop calling me that!" Umber exclaimed to which Flame shot him a smirk.

They continued flying and after a while, they landed at their house. It was dark outside and the candles were lit as usual. The dragonets from before were inside and not camping outside their house like earlier.

Thank the moons they're gone! Flame thought.

They landed in front of their house and both rushed inside and quickly set the bags of food down in the kitchen. Flame lit a few candles and the whole kitchen was illuminated immediately with bright, orange light.

"I'm so tired!" Flame said. "Let's hurry up and put these away so I can sleep!"

"I'm way ahead of you," Umber said, grabbing one of the wrapped

chickens and putting it on the top of the fridge where it would chill.

They both started putting the things away, cramming them on each of their respective shelves in the fridge. Umber's arms were sore and weak from everything and all he wanted to do was lay down.

At last, they finished putting everything away. Their fridge was stuffed full of everything and their arms, legs, and wings were tired and sore from all of the flying and carrying they did that day.

They threw the bags away and both rushed into their room to go to sleep.

They both lay on the bed and pulled the covers over them and cuddled close to each other like they usually did. Flame put his wing around Umber as usual and slowly drifted to sleep as their scales touched, warming each other.

Flame woke himself up in the middle of the night, quickly sitting up and turning over to Umber who he shook awake.

"Umber, it's time to get up!" Flame said. "We need to make the food for today."

"Just five more minutes," Umber pleaded.

"Don't make me say it," Flame warned. "Mud muf-"

"Okay! Okay! I'm awake!" Umber said, shooting up out of bed as soon as he could.

They both got up and started walking to the door, the floorboards squeaking underneath them the whole time. Once they opened the door, Flame peered his head out and was blinded by the light of the candles he forgot to put out.

"AH!" he shrieked, covering his eyes with his talons as fast as he could.

Umber peeked his head around the doorway and had the same reaction as him.

Slowly, both of them opened their eyes, letting them adjust to the light as they both stumbled through the living room. Once they got in the kitchen, both of their eyes were fully adjusted to the light. Flame opened the fridge and started taking out all of the meat and potatoes. Umber opened the cupboard and started taking out all of the spices as well.

"All right, time to start cooking," Flame said. "It's going to be a long day."

Author's Note: This was a long chapter haha (6.1k+ words!). Usually, my chapters are nowhere near this long but I got sidetracked with a few things (aka everything at the beginning was made up on the spot up to the Sora and Jet visit) which made it so that I couldn't go more in detail at the end. After this, I'm going back to redo the prologue which shouldn't take long. Also, I can't promise to continually weekly upload like I have been, especially if the chapters are getting this long. I came into this eager to write and improve, but making myself update weekly burns me out pretty quickly.

Chapter 4

Flame's POV

Flame wiped the sweat off of his scales while taking the chicken out of the oven. He looked down at it and the skin was brown and crispy and could be easily peeled off. He cut a piece off with his talons and threw it down his throat. The white meat was juicy and tender and its flavor was extremely potent. This was the third chicken that was cooked and thankfully the last.

He put on an oven mitt and grabbed the scorching hot baking sheet. He set it down on the stovetop, grabbed a few large forks, and stabbed each side of the chicken with them. Carefully, he carried it from the stove to the table and plopped it down on a metal plate, and covered it with a rounded metal top that could snap in place. The metal plate had a bar on the bottom of it that connected to a rod. There were at least ten other of these metal plates connected to the rod. There were two layers to it and each layer had 5 of the plates attached to it. The metal was a special type of metal that could keep warm food warm and colder food like a cake, cold. At the top of the rod, there was a handle that could easily be gripped.

"FINALLY!" Flame yelled, practically falling into Umber with exhaustion.

Umber's scales were slippery with sweat so he had to catch Flame so he didn't fall over instead of resting on him. His necklace was resting on one of the clean, untouched countertops so that it didn't get dirty since he had been working on making the different spices and sauces for the meat. Flame had his own barbecue sauce recipe that he had to reluctantly tell Umber beforehand so that he could make it.

"Careful!" Umber said, stumbling over a little bit from his weight. "You're gonna knock me over!"

"Calm down, mu-" Flame cut himself off after seeing Umber's face as

the word began to leave his mouth.

Umber glared at him with his brow furrowed and his snout wrinkled. His eyes felt as if they were shooting daggers at Flame, piercing through each of his scales and out through his back like flaming arrows. As scary as his gaze was, he knew it was harmless. He rarely made this face and Flame knew it meant "stop before I get mad at you and ignore you for the next ten minutes". He could never stay mad at him and Flame knew it, but he still didn't want to make Umber mad.

"That's what I thought," Umber warned. "Say it again and I'll come up with a name for you too."

Flame knew he wasn't lying so he just threw his talons up in the air and backed up in submission.

"Fine," Flame reluctantly agreed.

This wasn't over though; Flame would eventually catch him when he was off guard. He couldn't just drop the name forever that easily, and he was suspicious that Umber knew that too.

Maybe on our anniversary, I can catch him, he thought. *Whatever he decides to do for that.*

His mind began racing through the thousands of different possibilities for what they'll do. Maybe he'll keep it simple and go to a restaurant, or maybe he will go completely overboard and find a reservation for a fancy waterproof hotel underwater in the middle of the ocean that only served raw salmon and trout. As unlikely as that seemed, he had no clue what Umber was planning but the excitement ran through his entire body like a jolt of lightning at the thought of it.

"We still have a while before we have to leave," Flame said. "Wanna grab a bite to eat? I know a market that I know you'll like."

"YES!" Umber exclaimed. "I'm starving!"

Flame began looking around at the kitchen, realizing that it was a mess. There were empty spice bottles, sauce on the countertops, and

many, many, dirty bowls and cooking utensils everywhere. Not only that, but they were a mess as well. They were both covered head to talon in food and sweat. Flame was definitely hungry after cooking for so long; it had taken them at least 4 hours to finish making the food. Once Flame caught Umber's eyes, he could tell that he noticed the same thing.

"River first, then food," Flame said.

He looked up at Umber and could see the disappointment spread across his face when he realized that he had to actually wait for his food this time.

Quickly, Flame grabbed his talon without a second thought and started dragging him through the kitchen, the living room, and to the back door. The back door had a window at the top of it and had a perfect view of the river from it. The sun was coming up and the dragonets were slowly coming outside to play as usual. Flame could hear their screams already.

"Hey! Quit!" Umber demanded.

"You want food, don't you?" Flame asked. "Stop acting like a baby and get in the river then."

Umber shot him a scowl and Flame could tell that it was obviously fake.

By this point, they were already out the door and halfway to the river. Flame looked down the roaring stream and didn't see any dragonets in it this time, which surprised him. He lightly threw Umber towards the river, signaling for him to get in.

After a few seconds, Umber started towards the river and jumped in once he got there. Flame could hear quick, shallow breaths come from him once his scales met the water.

"The water is so much warmer today!" Umber yelled. "You should cannonball in with me!"

Flame could tell that this was an obvious lie, but he also suspected that it wasn't very convincing on purpose. Regardless, he decided to

entertain the idea by running towards the river and doing a fake jump right in front of it.

"You thought I would fall for that, didn't you?" Flame asked. "Well, think again! This SkyWing is too smart for your tri-"

Flame was cut off when Umber leaped halfway out of the water and grabbed his talons, yanking him into the ice-cold river with him. As soon as Flame's scales met the water, it felt like they had been replaced with ice; very cold, IceWing chilled ice with a serving of frost breath. Immediately, Flame started breathing quick, shallow breaths just like Umber was. His arms and legs went numb and he quickly realized why there weren't any dragonets in the water today.

"HOLY FUCK THAT'S COLD!" Flame screamed. "WHY IS IT SO COLD?!"

"Flame! There are dragonets around!" Umber warned, peering over at the path, and was hit by a wave of relief when he saw the dragonets still playing as if they heard nothing. "And you promised to stop cussing!"

A few months earlier, he had promised to stop swearing. Umber had urged him many times before, so he finally gave in. It was hard for him at first but it got easier as he slowly got out of the habit. Sure, there were a few times when he slipped up, but it hadn't been around Umber.

"Uhm, well...I didn't entirely stop," he admitted. "I just don't do it around you."

"You liar!" Umber laughed, lightly hitting Flame on the shoulder playfully.

"Calm down, MudWing. I don't do it often." Flame assured. "And I don't do it around the dragonets either, so I don't see what the problem is."

"The problem is that it's a bad habit!" Umber argued. "I hate it when you cuss." His smile quickly faded when his next words came to

mind. "It reminds me of...of how you used to be...when we first met. I just don't like thinking about it..."

The iciness of the water quickly faded and all Flame could feel was a stab of guilt that hit him in the chest as if he was getting tackled by Pheasant all over again; except this time, Umber was the one who was getting hurt. All he ever tried to do was make Umber happy, but he was overlooking a huge part of that by doing something he had been unconsciously doing for years. He wished he had thought about it more. He wished he put in more effort to make him happy. He wished he'd kept his promise.

"I-I'm sorry. I...I didn't know," Flame stammered, now looking down through the water at his talons. The wave of guilt was flowing through his entire body now, reaching from the tip of his tail to the points on his horns. "Why didn't you say anything? I mean, you've acted like it's no big deal this whole time..."

Both of them were shivering at this point and Flame instinctively got closer to him. Their scales were touching now but Flame didn't get the usual warmth he was used to.

"I didn't want to remind you of how you used to be..." Umber admitted. "I know how much you hate the old you, so I didn't want to remind you of that version of yourself. I'm sorry."

No. I'm the bad guy here, Umber, Flame thought. *I promised to stop and I didn't! This is my fault!*

"No! Don't be sorry!" Flame exclaimed. "*I'm* the one who should be sorry! I didn't even think about how you felt! I never even thought about it like that before so I'm to blame! I broke my promise... I'm sor-"

Flame was cut off by Umber's soft lips meeting his. All of his thoughts, all of the things he was going to say, were immediately whisked away by a strange, unknown force. Flame's heart felt like it had been kickstarted back to life by the shock that ran through Umber's mouth and into his. After a few seconds, Umber pulled away and gazed affectionately into his eyes.

"It's okay...I forgive you," Umber said softly.

Flame hadn't expected such swift forgiveness, but then again, it was Umber. Umber could never stay mad at him and he often thought about what he would have to do for him to get mad at him for more than a few minutes. He didn't want to find out the answer to this question, but it didn't stop him from thinking about it in times like this.

They both leaned back in and started kissing again, slowly making their way up and out of the water and onto the warm grass. Red scales met brown as they both lay on the grass with their tails intertwined. Flame could feel the hot sun beaming against his scales, warming them up as he got lost in the paradise that Umber brought him into.

Umber's POV

Apparently, one of the dragonets from the crowd on the path had seen them and they all quietly made their way over, trampling their talons against the grass. They weren't very quiet though, but neither Umber nor Flame noticed the many thumps and snickers. They were so lost in each other that everything around them seemed to vanish into a white void. It was as if they thought they were the only dragons in the world and nothing else mattered. That was until Flame pushed him away with eyes full of panic.

"What's wrong? Did I do something wrong?" Umber questioned.

Without needing a response, he followed Flame's gaze, immediately flipping his head around to the sight of at least 5 dragonets staring at them. He instantly shot up and stared back, wide-eyed. His face turned red hot as the embarrassment of the situation set in. He looked over at Flame who was already standing up with the same expression.

"O-Oh! Hey t-there..." Umber stammered. He wasn't sure if he could build up the courage to say anything else, but his jaw moved before he had time to think about it. "M-Me and Flame were just play fighting," his voice shook nervously.

"No you weren't!" yelled one of the dragonets in the crowd. "You were totally just making out with him!"

Umber got even more flustered after hearing those words. He was tempted to run back inside and never come back out again. That was only if Flame agreed to come with him, of course.

"H-How long have you all been standing there?" Umber asked.

"Long enough to know that you two are crazy for each other," one of the dragonets said.

"Uh-, why don't you run along now and go back to...whatever it was you were doing before," Flame insisted.

"We will," a different dragonet piped up. He was in the front of the crowd so Umber could see that he was a SkyWing. His horns were a little more rounded and curved inward a bit. "so you can get back to *whatever* it was you two were doing before too," he said.

As soon as the dragonet finished, they all walked away without looking back. Umber could see the many footprints that led to them now that he was looking. He was so grateful that the conversation ended when it did or else he might have acted on his temptation.

Oh moons, Umber thought.

They both looked at each other for a second, trying to process what had happened before breaking out into uncontrolled laughter at the same time. Umber caught a glimpse of Flame's face while he was laughing and couldn't help but feel his heart begin to warm. Looking at Flame laugh was like looking at the sun lowering, reflecting its orange-yellow light off of many different colored scales as it dove below the horizon; it was just so beautiful to him. The way he smiled, the way the light would bounce off of his light orange eyes, the way his laughter filled the air like a perfect symphony. He wishes he could play these moments over and over on repeat for hours. To Umber, nothing in Pyrrhia was more beautiful than that.

"So...food time?" Umber asked.

Flame shot him a quick smile and a nod which Umber translated to mean yes. In a split second, Umber shot in the air, blowing thousands of blades of grass in different directions as he took off. Not long after, Flame did the same except he caught up with Umber only a few seconds later and slowed down to fly beside him.

"You don't even know where we're going!" Flame reminded.

"Don't need to. All I know is that the food's this way!" Umber said. He looked over at Flame's face and could see the disappointment spread across it. "But- uh, we can go to whatever place you wanted to show me too!" he immediately added. Flame was obviously satisfied with this response when he gave Umber a little peck on the cheek.

After a while of flying, they landed on the gravel path, kicking up rocks as their talons made contact with the ground. Umber could smell the different mixes of meats, stews, pasta, noodles, and cooked vegetables while he followed Flame to whatever market he planned on taking Umber to. Every now and again, he would look over at the markets and see different dragons getting their food and handing the salesdragon many reflective gold coins. He couldn't help but get even more hungry when looking at them.

Finally, Umber's laid his eyes on a big sign that had different oranges and reds in different spirals and swirls that was connected to a market that had dark logs on each corner, holding up a roof that protected him from the sunlight. He had a distinct feeling that this was the market Flame was taking him to, so he began to read the sign.

E-X-O-T-I-C F-R-U-I-T-S, Umber sounded out in his head.

Flame hadn't taught him the word "exotic" yet, so he decided to challenge himself to figure it out before they got there. He quickly remembered the tricks that Flame taught him.

EX-O-TIC..., Umber paused, repeating each of the sounds in his head a few times before he realized. *EXOTIC! Exotic fruits! Ooooh, I haven't had many types of fruit before! They probably got them from the rainforest. There are so many different fruits there!*

They were at the market now and Umber could see the many different fruits stored in baskets in the front. One container was full of an orange-yellow fruit, each being different shapes and sizes, another was full of a spherical yellow-lime fruit, and there was another basket that was almost empty that had fruit that looked round and had dark red skin that looked almost brown. Umber guessed it was an apple at first but as he got closer, he could tell that it was certainly not an apple. The skin was far too rigid for it to be an apple.

"5 passion fruits, please," Flame said to the salesdragon.

Instantly, the dragon reached his talons towards the basket that was nearly empty, pulling out 5 passion fruits and dropping them in a bag before handing them to Flame, who dropped him a few coins in return. Umber had never heard of passion fruit before, but he was excited to try it.

"Passion fruit?" Umber looked over at Flame. "What's passion fruit?"

"You've never had passion fruit before?" Flame asked. "You used to live by the rainforest, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but we never went over there because of the *ghost* that was there," Umber explained.

"Oh, yeah. I forgot about that," Flame remembered. "Let's go find someplace to eat these."

Flame looked around and spotted an open bench. He started walking towards it and Umber swiftly followed behind him, excited to try the weird fruit that Flame had. They both sat down and Flame took two of them out of the bag and handed one to Umber. Umber opened his maw and was about to take a big bite of it before Flame stopped him.

"Umber, that's not how you eat it. The outside isn't edible. Here, let me show you," Flame said.

Flame took his talon and sliced it down the middle, exposing a bunch of weird yellow beans with green seeds in the middle that

gleamed in the sunlight. As soon as Umber saw this, his mouth started watering. He quickly noticed and wiped the spit that was already drooling down his face. He looked around, trying to see if anyone noticed and thankfully nobody did.

Flame scooped out a big chunk of it with his tongue and looked over at Umber who was already cutting his down the middle. His talons slipped and he ended up spilling the goopy yellow seeds all over himself.

"Oops," Umber said while scooping the insides of the passion fruit off of his chest and into his mouth without even thinking.

Immediately, his eyes widened. The fruit tasted sweet and citrusy and it felt like each seed was exploding with flavor like fireworks in his mouth, reaching every corner of his tongue. Instantly, he looked at what was left of the passion fruit inside of its hard shell and stuck his tongue in one of the halves, scooping as much as he could into his mouth.

"I told you you'd like it," Flame said.

"I love it!" Umber said. "You have to find out how to make me something with this!"

"I can try, but no promises," Flame laughed under his breath with a smile forming on his face.

By now, Umber had finished the whole fruit and already had taken another one out of the bag, slicing it in half and scooping out the insides into his mouth.

They both finished their fruit and were on their way home now. They could see their house in the distance, but something was off. There was a strange SkyWing sitting at their door, waiting for them to get home. Umber and Flame both traded expressions of concern while wondering what they wanted.

Once they were closer, they could tell that the SkyWing was female. Her scales were extremely shiny and she had a few gems embedded in them as well. She had many bracelets and rings that had many

different colored gems in each of them. Her horns were more rounded at the top and curved inward, and Umber immediately knew who her dragonet was.

They both landed on the path, a few meters away from their doorstep before both shooting her a look of confusion. As they walked towards her, she noticed them and quickly turned to them with a scoff.

"Can...we help you?" Umber questioned.

"Yes actually, you can!" she said with anger in her voice. "My dragonet told me that you two were...uhm...making out in your backyard! Did lying about one of the Dragonets of Destiny being your brother not bring you enough attention? Did you have to bring the dragonets into your little scheme to be the most popular dragons in the neighborhood?"

I knew I shouldn't have said anything! Umber scolded himself.

"We...um...we didn-" Umber was cut off.

"I think what he was trying to say is that what we do is none of your business!" Flame shot her a look that Umber could only recognize as one thing: anger.

Uh oh.

"And for the Dragonet of Destiny thing, he doesn't talk about it for a reason!" Flame yelled. "So how about you go back to your perfect house with your whitey-tidy counters and perfectly sorted scale polishers and leave us alone, you useless lizard!"

Both the SkyWing and Umber stood there with their jaws on the ground and shock written all over their faces. Umber hadn't expected for Flame to get so angry over something so small, but he was grateful that he said something because one thing's for sure: Umber wouldn't have been able to bring himself to say something like that.

"How dare you!" the SkyWing started as if she was about to go off on a never-ending rant. Her face burned with anger and her eyes

looked as if they were as fiery as the sun, threatening to scorch everything that crossed her gaze.

"Yep-, time to go inside Flame." Umber panicked and started pushing Flame through the door before he could react. "H-Have a nice day," Umber stuttered out before slamming it behind them as if they were running from someone dangerous. For all they know, that SkyWing could've been about to kill them so Umber thought that was an appropriate reaction. She definitely seemed like she did with the anger in her eyes.

"Did you really have to be *that* mean about it?" Umber questioned.

"She was yelling at us for no reason!" Flame reminded.

"I mean, she kinda did have a reason," Umber admitted. "We did make out in front of her dragonet for who knows how long."

"But the thing about you lying about Clay being your brother! Why would anyone lie about that?" Flame said. "Besides, the look on her face when I called her a useless lizard was priceless!"

"Heh, I guess it was pretty funny," Umber smiled, looking down at his talons. "Hopefully we don't have to worry about her anymore now."

That's when Umber's eyes gazed across the kitchen, recognizing the mess that they had left behind. It was the same as it was when Flame pulled him out the door.

"You just gonna stand there and look at it or are you gonna help me, MudWing," Flame said playfully.

Umber shot him a smile and they both walked into the kitchen. He quickly grabbed his necklace off of the one clean counter and put it back on. They began washing the dishes, cleaning the countertops, and making sure that everything was still warm and ready to be flown to the beach. There was one dish that Flame didn't want him to see which he thought was weird, but didn't think too much of it.

Flame's POV

An hour later, the kitchen was finally clean. Every surface was perfectly shiny as if Turtle himself came over and cast a spell to make everything look brand new. There wasn't even a spec of food on any of the counters. Flame knew that out of any dragon he knew, Umber would be the most qualified to figure that out. Flame sometimes thought that he could sense where food is just by stepping into the room at times.

Flame gripped his talons around the handle of the shiny metal tower of plates that had all of the food inside and started to the door, signaling for Umber to follow him. The plates were heavy; too heavy for Umber to fly with but not for him to carry. Regardless he didn't say anything to Umber who was already at the door next to him.

Maybe he's more excited about this than I am, Flame joked to himself.

"You ready?" Flame said while opening the door.

"R-Ready as ever," Umber said.

Flame looked over at Umber and saw his face. He recognized the look that he was met with; he was nervous about something, but Flame couldn't tell what he was nervous about.

Chromis's hatching day? He thought. *No, definitely not. Maybe it's the dragonets?* Then it hit him like a boulder that had just gotten launched from a trebuchet. *It's that SkyWings mother... How could I have forgotten about that?!*

"Umber," Flame said, catching his attention immediately. "don't worry about that SkyWing from before. If she tries anything, I'll shove a rock up her nose and force her to dance!" Flame joked. Obviously, this worked because Umber giggled a little after he said this.

"Are you actually ready to leave now?" Flame asked. "Or are there any other dragons you want me to take care of?"

"You always make me feel better." Umber gave him a peck on the cheek

"I'll take that as a yes," Flame said. "Now let's get going, this thing is heavy!"

Flame opened the door and walked out into the warm sunlight. There was a slight breeze that countered the heat from the sun. The combination of the two made him feel more relaxed than he did all day. Now that everything was going smoothly, he could stop worrying about anything going wrong. That was until, he saw the SkyWing from before standing around 50 feet from their house, staring at them. She shot them a scowl and Flame gave Umber a kiss on the cheek while looking at her as a response, indirectly saying "go away because I'm not in the mood to have my day ruined again". Thankfully, Umber didn't see her and they took off in the direction of the beach.

After an exhausting 20-minute flight for Flame, they finally reached the beach for hopefully the last time. There were a few things set up, but Flame could see the rest of the decorations scattered all over the sand. Avalanche and Shrimp were busy setting up a few other decorations from what Flame could see.

They landed on the sand with a thump, leaving their talon prints embedded in the sand where they landed. The sand was warm and Flame could hear the waves crashing in the distance as if they were bolts of lightning crashing down during a thunderstorm. The wind was blowing in his face, slowly cooling him down from the flight there.

They began walking towards Avalanche and Shrimp before they were spotted by the SeaWing, who was now standing on a chair, struggling to get a sign connected between the two poles from before.

"Flame! Umber! You're right on time!" Shrimp said. "Umber, can you hold the other side of this while I try to get this side on?"

"Of course!" Umber said, running over to him and leaving Flame with the plates still in his talons. His arms were burning at this point and all he wanted to do was set it down.

"Gee, thanks Umber," Flame said as he scurried his way over to the

table and set the massive metal tower down on the table.

"Oops, sorry Flame," Umber said, already standing on one of the chairs with one side of the sign in his talons.

"Nah, it's fine," Flame said. "Besides, I deserve it for what I said earlier."

Flame still felt a little residual guilt from earlier. He wished he could hug Umber and wrap his wings all around him and tell him how sorry he was, but words couldn't describe how sorry he really was. The only thing he could do now is hope that Umber knew how bad he felt about it.

Think more next time! Flame thought to himself. *Don't let Umber carry your burden! He doesn't deserve it!*

Flame looked over at the sign and his brain had finally recognized what it said. It read "HAPPY FIRST HATCHING PARTY!" in many different colored letters. They were all randomized but the colors consisted of red, yellow, blue, green, pink, and orange. Flame thought it was all too colorful, but as long as Chromis liked it, he liked it.

Umber and Shrimp finally got the sign up and it began waving in the wind, making the two poles wiggle in the sand. Flame assumed that the sign must be acting like some sort of artificial wing, pushing and pulling on the poles.

"You two will have to take over for a little while we go get Chromis and Simoom," Avalanche said. "There aren't many decorations left to put up, so you should get done by the time we all get back. His friends should be coming later, so don't worry about making everything perfect."

"Simoom is coming?" Umber asked.

"Of course she's coming!" Avalanche said. "She wouldn't miss his first hatching party for anything!"

"Oh, well, I guess that makes sense," Umber said.

"Alright, we gotta go," she said, signaling for Shrimp to follow her to which he quickly jumped off of the chair and ran over to her. "WE'LL BE BACK SOON," she yelled, now in the air.

There only a few decorations left to set up and Flame guessed that it wouldn't take long. He looked over at Umber who shot him a competitive look with his talons dug into the sand. Flame shot him the same expression, knowing what was about to unfold.

Oh, it's on, Flame thought.

Immediately, Flame scrambled around, grabbing at any decoration he could and looking around for their place. He grabbed a colorful napkin holder and quickly placed it on the table next to the massive metallic tower of plates and quickly ran back to the pile of decorations, kicking up sand as he ran.

That's 1! He thought.

He grabbed at another decoration, which was the napkins that belonged to the napkin holder that he just placed down. The napkins had many splotches of colorful paint on them which had the same colors as the sign. Quickly, he ran over to the table, shaking off any sand that could've gotten on them, and placed them down inside the napkin holder.

That's 2!

He raced back once again, and he and Umber both grabbed onto the same item at the same time. They both stared each other in the eyes for a couple of moments before Flame quickly let go and grabbed onto another decoration, running and setting it down in its respective place before Umber could react.

3!

He ran over, grabbed another decoration and set it down, and kept doing it until the pile was completely gone. The sand was barren and all that could be seen were imprints of talons all over and many piles of kicked-up sand from running.

That's 11! There's no way Umber could've beaten that! He thought.

"So, how many less did you get than me, Umber?" Flame said with a smug look on his face.

"I think the question is, how many less did you get than *me*?" Umber retorted.

"Well, I got 11! Let's see you beat that!" Flame said.

"Oh, those are just rookie numbers," Umber said. "I got 14!"

"Wha- how! You must've cheated!" Flame said.

"Stop being a poor sport and just admit that I'm the faster...uh...decoration setter-upper than you!" Umber said. There was silence for a couple of moments before Umber reminded Flame of what he said. "Say it!"

"UGH! Fine!" Flame said. "You're the better decoration setter-whatever you said than me," he finished with a grunt.

"So, what's my prize?" Umber asked.

"Prize?! I thought this was just a friendly competition between a cheating MudWing and an incredibly handsome, smart, charismatic SkyWing." Flame paused. "But I *can* think of one thing I could give you as a prize," Flame said, inching closer to Umber.

Flame's mouth started slowly inching closer to Umbers as he turned his head to the side and closed his eyes, meeting a familiar set of lips that he never got tired of meeting. They both slowly fell to their side, intertwining their tails as they slowly kissed on the soft bed of warm sand while the sunlight reflected off of their scales. Every time they kissed, it ignited a spark in Flame that refused to go out until one of them dared to pull away. This time, he really was in paradise while kissing Umber; grains of sand getting in between his scales while the soft ocean waves crashed in the background.

They gripped each other tightly, pushing their snouts together as Flame thought of the many futures they could have together. He thought of how they could adopt a dragonet together as if it was their own. Or how they could get married and lay together on a beach like this one, gazing up at the moons every night for an

eternity or two. Or, how they could travel all of Pyrrhia together and observe nature at its finest. Sometimes, he wished he could see the many different futures like Clearsight and Darkstalker could and ponder on the best ones for hours, trying his best to shape them into reality with just the thought of them.

Flame lay there for a few minutes, cherishing every moment with him as if they were his last. His mind picked up on wings beating in the background and he quickly poked his head up and out of the love-driven trance that he was in, but it was too late; Simoom, Chromis, Avalanche, and Shrimp were already staring at them while hovering in the air.

"Not in front of the dragonet!" Simoom shouted, trying to cover Chromis's eyes by flying in front of him. She couldn't exactly cover his eyes though, or she would probably accidentally knock him out of the sky; or worse, pierce him with her tail barb.

There wasn't a cactus in sight and certainly not any for miles, so it was probably for the best.

Both Umber and Flame quickly scrambled to their talons, trying to ignore the fact that that had been the second time they had been caught that day by dragonets.

"Oh...uh- sorry. We just finished setting up everything and got a little..." Umber looked over at Flame. "...preoccupied."

"Yes...we can tell," Simoom said, obviously getting uncomfortable at the thought of what she saw.

Avalanche and Shrimp were used to it though. They had caught Umber and Flame doing this many, many times before so at this point, it wasn't unordinary to either of them. One time, Avalanche had reluctantly agreed to come visit Flame and Umber. Chromis hadn't liked the flight there, so imagine how he felt when he opened the door to see his brother making out with Umber on the couch.

"Anyways," Simoom said, hoping to change the subject. "let's get this party started!"

Authors note: MY HEART COULD HARDLY TAKE FLAME AND UMBER IN THIS CHAPTER! It was definitely a rollercoaster of emotions for me, but I'm glad I got through it in one piece. I stayed up super late finishing the last part of this because I couldn't go to sleep knowing how close I was to finishing my favorite chapter yet (around 6am haha). This definitely tells me how hard things are going to get later in this story because things...they get really emotional, I'll just say that. Also, semicolons and figurative language! Yay! I'm super proud of how I did with some of the things in this chapter, especially the beginning part.

Chapter 5

Umber's POV

They all landed in the sand with a *thump*, furdling their wings back in. Umber thought that Chromis looked especially small now that there were so many other adult dragons around him. He was definitely bigger than he was a year ago, but Umber couldn't tell because of how gradual the change was.

Quickly, Simoom trotted her way over to them and shot them a stone-cold gaze. Her eyes threatened to turn Umber to stone if he so much as moved the wrong way. He unconsciously tried making himself seem smaller and backed up a bit behind Flame.

Umber and Simoom had met a few times before and from what he could tell, Simoom was not one you wanted to make angry. Her gaze was even scarier than Umber's and she was insanely protective over Chromis, yelling at any dragon who even looked at him the wrong way. He could only imagine the scolding they were about to get from her. He bit his tongue as she got closer, wishing that she would just stop short and back off, but she didn't; she kept walking until she was only a few feet away from them both. Her gaze was even more apparent now, and Umber pulled his wings even closer to him than before.

"You two better behave for this," Simoom said through her teeth. "because if I figure out that Chromis sees you two do that again, you're gonna wish you were never hatched."

Umber looked over at Flame who had the same terrified expression that he did. This caught even Umber off guard because normally, Flame would be yelling at her at this point, probably saying many profanities and insults. Looking at even Flame scared made Umber shiver all the way from his head, through his wings, down his spine, and all the way to the tip of his tail. This was the only dragon he had ever seen Flame be scared of. The only dragon except for Stonemover, of course.

The only thing that Umber managed to do was do a quick, nervous nod at her. The type of nod you would expect to see from a dragon whose life was on the line.

"SO!" Simoom yelled. "Why don't we all play a game of hide and seek while we wait for your friends to get here, Chromis." Simoom shot a friendly smile at Chromis, who was standing beside Avalanche and Shrimp still.

She-, she just switched up that fast? Umber thought.

He looked up at her face and couldn't even see a twitch of anger on it anymore. It was like it was a curse and Chromis was the cure. Umber hadn't seen many other dragons who could just switch up their mood like that, especially after seeing the fire in her eyes.

"Yay! I love hide and seek," Chromis said, jumping in the air and kicking up sand as it got blown in the wind.

"I know you do." Simoom chuckled a little under her breath. "Are you two playing?" Simoom said, shooting her death glare at Flame and Umber. It made Umber feel cornered like he didn't have a choice, so he just frantically nodded his head.

"A-Are you playing, Flame?" Umber said, looking over at Flame.

"Uh-." Flame looked at Simoom. "Y-Yeah! Of course I am!" Flame said with a nervous laugh.

"I wanna go first! I wanna go first!" Chromis said.

Simoom started taking a step closer to Chromis, to which he immediately backed up.

"No! I want to try and hide alone this time," Chromis said.

"Are you sure? I mean, I don't want you getting lost or anything-," Simoom said.

"Pleassseee!" Chromis begged. "I'll be safe, I promise!"

Simoom shot a look at Avalanche and Shrimp to which they gave

her a nod of approval.

"Alright, but you have to be super extra quiet this time," Simoom said. "and not tell me exactly where you're hiding."

Chromis just chuckled at this, shooting a smile at Flame and Umber. Umber would have probably said yes anyways, but Simoom probably did that as a precaution. He could tell that she really cared for Chromis and wanted to make this party as good for him as she possibly could, no matter how many times she had to put them both in their place.

Simoom then went on to cover her eyes and start counting, which Flame and Umber immediately mimicked.

"ONE!" Simoom counted, signaling to Chromis to start hiding. "TWO! THREE!"

"NINETEEN! TWENTY!" Simoom finished counting and uncovered her eyes. "READY OR NOT, HERE WE COME!"

Umber opened his eyes, immediately scanning for places he could be hiding. The first thing that caught his eye was a little patch of forest down the beach, so Umber thought it would probably be a good idea to check there first. The trees were surprisingly green, the grass was waving in the wind, and the trees looked to be some sort of oak. There were bushes and overgrowth all over the place and it obviously hadn't been maintained. He started walking towards it, and Flame quickly caught up to him. That was until they heard Simoom yell behind them, stopping them dead in their tracks.

"WAIT!" Simoom said. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To the forest? Why do you care?" Flame said.

"Because I'm going with you!" Simoom said. "I'm not going to have you two do something like that again in front of Chromis!"

"Oh, please. If we wanted to go and do that again, we'd just go home," Flame said. "and I'm not missing Chromis's first hatching party for something we have a lifetime to do."

"That's not what it looked like before," Simoom said.

"That was different!" Flame said. "Umber set up more decorations than me, so I had to give him his pr-"

"I'll stop you right there, I don't care anymore," Simoom said.

Umber saw a smirk go across Flame's face as he said this, but that wasn't what he was feeling. His face was getting flustered and all he wanted to do was get on with whatever Simoom wanted to do with them and not talk about anything anymore. He wished that he was home right now, cuddling with Flame on the couch and falling asleep on his shoulder. Even the thought of this brought Umber a warm, excited feeling in his chest. The kind that you feel whenever it's a cold, winter day outside and you're wrapped up in a nice cozy blanket, playing board games and eating food; lots and lots of food.

Why can't today just be normal? Umber thought. *Why can't we just play hide and seek and pretend like nothing ever happened?!*

As much as he wanted to regret the kiss, he couldn't. He would trade the world just to feel Flame's warm breath against his face as they got lost in each other one more time. Even though they had been together for so long and kissed so many times, he couldn't get enough of it. It was like an addiction that would never subside, no matter how long you went without it.

"*WE* are going to search the forest as a group. If we split up, we *all* split up, not just me splitting up from you two," Simoom said.

"Yeah, blah blah blah," Flame said. "we get it, you don't trust us. Can we just get on with this already?" Simoom shot Flame a glare after he said this that terrified Umber to the core.

They were up to the forest at this point and Umber could already tell that this was going to be a long day. Just at a first glance, he could already see thousands of different hiding spots. Some were in bushes, some in overhang from the trees, and there were even some spots where he could just cover himself in leaves and never be found again. Umber started pushing leaves and branches aside, kicking up leaves and even flew up to a few branches that didn't

crack under his weight to survey the area. Nothing.

Did he get lost? Are we looking for a dragon that isn't even around here? Maybe if we just keep looking we'll surely find-

"FOUND HIM!" Flame yelled, kicking up leaves in many directions.

Quickly, Umber raced over to where Flame was, and lying underneath all of the leaves, was a rotted wooden log on its side. It had different beige mushrooms growing out of the sides, pointing up at the sun. Just an average, uninteresting log, and certainly not a dragonet.

"Oh...nevermind," Flame said. Umber shot him an unimpressed look.

Umber quickly shot up into the branches of the nearest tree, looking around one more time. This patch of forest wasn't big, so it shouldn't take them too much longer to find Chromis if he was here. He could just imagine Chromis's face right now, probably looking at them and holding back laughs and snickers in some random brush that they haven't checked yet. Then, an image of Chromis flashed through his head — terrified and lost, frantically looking for some other dragon that could lead him back to the beach.

Umber started getting worried again, scared that Chromis might actually be lost. As the seconds ticked by of Chromis still being in hiding, that situation started seeming more and more likely to Umber. He opened his ears, discerning each individual sound from the last listening for even a laugh coming from anywhere nearby. He could hear the caws of the birds, the rustling of leaves, the crickets, and the waves crashing against the sand on the beach, but no laughing, no snickering, no nothing.

Umber was panicking now, scared that his worst fear at this moment was coming true.

"CHROMIS!" Umber yelled. His voice echoed through the trees, bouncing off of the many logs and coming straight back to him. "Should we go back and tell Avalanche and Shrimp?" Umber yelled down to Simoom. "I mean, I can't hear anything and we can't find him! He could be lost...or-"

"Of course you're not going to hear him!" Simoom said. "The entire point of hide and seek is to hide and try to *not* be found. Besides, Chromis would never get lost. He would just fly up and find his way back at even the thought of getting lost," she assured.

Umber wasn't so sure about this, but he trusted Simoom's judgment. She was his babysitter after all. Regardless, he was still nervous about Chromis.

Maybe I'm overreacting, he thought. *He might not be here, but he might be hiding somewhere else*.

"I don't think he's here," Umber said. "Maybe we should look somewhere else?"

"Yeah, we've been looking here for at least fifteen minutes," Flame said. "Can we ju-" he paused. "Wait, why am I asking you for permission? I'm looking somewhere else. You can either come and look with me, or you can stay here and keep looking for a needle in a haystack. C'mon Umber."

He's right. Why are we listening to her? Umber thought. *Why is she acting like OUR babysitter? We're adults!*

Without hesitation, Umber jumped off of the tree and started gliding towards Flame, smacking into multiple different branches and leaves on the way. At this moment, he stopped caring about what Simoom was telling them to do. He was here to have fun with Chromis, and his overprotective babysitter wasn't going to stop him from doing that.

He looked back and could see Simoom's face; she was not happy.

"I swear by the moons! If you two-" she was cut off.

"Make out in front of Chromis we'll wish we were never hatched," Flame mocked. "We get it." Simoom growled at this.

Umber followed flame through the forest, knocking branches away while they made their way out. Umber didn't dare to look back and see the stone-cold look on Simoom's face; he was scared that looking back would mean certain death.

"She's a mood kill," Flame commented once they were out of earshot. "It's *my* brother's birthday, so why should I listen to her?

"I think she's just being protective, Flame," Umber said. "I mean, you heard how much she likes Chromis."

Up ahead, they could see the sand through the trees. The light was gleaming through the transparent leaves like a thousand tiny suns spilling their light across the dirt with a golden hue. Now that he could feel the warmth coming from the sunlight, he realized that it was a lot cooler in the tiny forest with all of the canopies dimming out the sun's heat.

Umber pushed his way through the leaves and stepped into the warm sand. He could see Avalanche and Shrimp in the distance, laying in the sand and enjoying the sun's warmth with their tails over their talons.

Maybe they know where Chromis went! Then I can be sure that he isn't missing! Umber thought.

As he made his way to them, he could smell the different foods that Flame made; they were definitely still warm, he could tell from the smell. Umber couldn't wait to eat all of the food that they both made. He imagined all of them making jokes, laughing, and having a good time at the table. Maybe even Simoom would loosen her grip on them both and realize that they didn't need constant supervision.

He started scanning the area of all the different places Chromis could be. There were so many places he could be hiding from what he saw. He could be hiding in the sand, he could be in the water, or he could even be down the shore more, hiding behind a small dune of sand.

Avalanche and Shrimp both shot them a confused look. Umber knew exactly why and could already see Simoom's eyes glaring at him as if it was red-light green-light and she was looking for any excuse to call him out of the game in his head. They were now only a few steps away from Avalanche and Shrimp now.

"Where's Simoom?" Shrimp asked. "Didn't she go with you?"

"She's a total mood kill!" Flame said. "She was treating us like *we* were the ones being babysat, so we left her behind!"

"She probably has a good reason," Avalanche scoffed. "Besides, you two need to be put under control sometimes so that's probably a good thing." Umber looked over at Flame who was clearly unamused by this.

"By the way," Umber asked. "Do you know where Chromis hid?" There was a moment of suspense between them all. Umber's heart dropped to the silence until Shrimp spoke up.

"Of course we know where he is!" he said. "We're the ones who gave him the idea to hide-" he stopped himself. "Uh- somewhere around here."

Umber felt a wave of relief pass through him. The sun seemed to feel a lot cooler now and he could feel his heart begin to slow. He could tell that he was sweating now, probably from the stress that was put on him.

OH THANK THE MOONS! Umber thought.

"Alright, get going now!" Avalanche said. "Chromis can't wait all day! And his friends will be here soon!"

Umber began looking around the area, checking off places that Chromis could be hiding in his head. The sand dunes were definitely places he would be checking, along with surveying the sand the whole time, making sure that he didn't accidentally step on Chromis because that would definitely hurt a lot; maybe even break a few bones. He looked over at the ocean, but then remembered that Shrimp and Avalanche told him where to hide.

It wouldn't even be fair, Umber thought. *None of us here are SeaWings, so how could we possibly find him in the water?*

"Alright, Flame," Umber said, immediately grabbing his attention. "We're checking the sand dunes. Make sure to watch where you're stepping because Chromis could be anywhere around here."

He began walking over to one of the sand dunes in the distance, looking down at his talons and scanning the sand in front of him. Every now and again, he would see a crab or two under the sand whenever he stepped too close. He thought of grabbing a few of them to eat, but then imagined crunching down on their hard shells.

Not happening, he thought.

He made it to one of the sand dunes and started looking all around it, digging at the sand to make sure that Chromis wasn't hiding inside. Once he was sure that he wasn't in there, he made his way to the next one, then the next one, then the next one until he and Flame had checked every single dune in the area. They had checked everywhere at this point and surely Simoom would've found him by now if she was still looking. It had been at least another fifteen minutes at this point and Umber wondered how a dragonet could hide so long without making any noise.

"Where could he be?!" Umber said. He was getting a bit frustrated at this point, but then looked over to the sea and realized that it was the only place they hadn't checked yet. "What if he..." he trailed off.

No way, Umber thought.

Flame could tell that Umber had realized something from the familiar look on his face.

"What? Do you know where he is?" Flame said.

"I might have an idea," Umber said.

He began walking over to the water and dipped his talons in. The water was warmer than it was at the stream behind their house, so Umber didn't mind getting in this time. He walked into the water, treading deeper and deeper until it was up to his shoulders, then he ducked his head under the water and began swimming out more.

He began swimming up and down the shoreline underwater, observing many different fish that swam away whenever he tried to

catch one. Once he finally caught one, he immediately let go of it when he saw the outline of a young, blue-purple-red dragonet sleeping on the ocean floor. He started swimming over to the dragonet as fast as he could knowing full well who it was.

He tapped Chromis on the shoulder, waking him up from his slumber. He took one look at Umber and instinctively flashed different scales; Umber assumed he was probably speaking aquatic out of habit. Shrimp has been teaching him aquatic ever since he first hatched, and he was definitely getting good at it.

He shot Chromis a confused look before signaling him to go to the surface by pointing his talon up.

Flame's POV

As Flame lay in the sand waiting for Umber's head to pop up out of the water, he began looking around at all of the different wildlife. He tried to name each bird by how they looked, tried to observe each crab he saw, and sometimes a fish would even jump out of the water further down the shoreline. It had been at least ten minutes since Umber went underwater and he couldn't help but start to worry.

Maybe he got stuck? Maybe MudWings can only hold their breath for an hour while standing still? Maybe-

All of his worries were quickly whisked away when he saw a bright glow underwater up the shoreline, like a thousand glow worms all lighting up at the same time. A few seconds later, he saw a familiar brown and blue-purple-red face pop up out of the water. Flame looked over at Avalanche and Shrimp who both fell asleep in the sand. He thought of going over there and kicking sand in their face for telling Chromis to hide in the ocean but then realized that that's something the *old* Flame would be doing right now.

Another wave of guilt began singeing his entire body, refusing to let go as he remembered everything that happened earlier. Everything kept reminding him of how he made Umber feel, and that made him feel even worse knowing that he put him through that for years. He just wanted to bang his head against a wall until all of the

horrible things he could do or say were knocked out of it, but there weren't any walls around. He was so stressed out by shame and guilt that he felt like crying.

Umber and Chromis both started swimming over to him while he stood there, deep in thought, and hardly even recognized that Umber was calling his name.

"FLAME!" Umber called out in the distance. "I FOUND HIM!"

Flame stood there, still too lost in thought to even begin to hear him for a few minutes before Umber got to shore with Chromis next to him. Chromis ran back over to Avalanche and Shrimp, waking them up by jumping on them with his wings open.

"Flame...?" Umber said, tapping him on the shoulder, bringing Flame back to reality with a jump as if he was just brought back to life after being dead for an eternity. "You OK?" Umber said softly.

"Oh- yeah," Flame said. "j-just...thinking," he said with a shaky voice.

He looked up at Umber and could see his face. All he could see was a dripping wet frown with a concerned look. He realized that he was hurting Umber just by keeping his feelings to himself and even more guilt mixed with sadness washed over him. At this, he got even closer to crying; crying and letting all of his feelings spill out.

"Flame, I know somethings wrong," Umber said. "Why won't you just tell me what happe-"

Hearing this made Flame uncontrollably fall into Umber with a hug, soaking his scales as they met. Tears started streaming down his face in fat globs and all he wanted to do was pour all of his feelings out on a slate so that Umber could see how sorry he was, and that's exactly what he did. His talons gripped against Umber's back and after a few seconds of whimpering, he could feel Umber grip back and that made him begin to cry even harder. More tears began to pour down his face and his heart began beating faster, feeling like it might explode any second now.

"I-I'm sorry!" Flame apologized. His chest began to get tight as he choked on his words.

"Sorry? Sorry for what?" Umber asked.

"For...for everything," Flame said. "I want to tell you how sorry I am about earlier, but I-I just don't know how, then I saw the look on your face and I realized that I was hurting you by not telling you a-and...I'm sorry."

"You're...you're still upset about that?" Umber said, pulling away so that he could look at Flame and started wiping the tears off of his face.

Flame gave a quick nod because he didn't feel like he would be able to say anything else without choking on his own spit, but alas, he couldn't stop himself.

"I feel like the worst boyfriend in the world right now!" Flame said. "You deserve so much more than me! You deserve someone who will actually listen to you and not some SkyWing who's trying to be someone he'll never be!" Even more, tears began rolling down his face and dripped onto the already-soaked sand.

"F-Flame...I-I didn't..." Umber stuttered out. He stood there in shock for a few seconds, trying to collect himself and formulate a sentence. "I meant what I said, Flame," he said. "I forgive you and I forgave you for all of the mistakes you've made in the past. I love you, and nothing is going to change that. I would never leave you for a better dragon, because there's not a dragon in Pyrrhia that I would ever love more than I do you. And, you have changed! You've changed so much since we first met! You probably wouldn't have even given this a second thought if you hadn't!" he reminded, pulling him back into a hug that was even tighter than before.

They hugged for a few minutes before Umber pulled away and stared into his eyes. His gaze made Flame's soul feel whole again. It made him feel like all the life that was sucked out of him before was getting pumped right back in.

"How about we go back and tell Simoom that we found Chromis?"

Umber said.

Flame gave Umber a nod and they turned around and started to walk back. Flame looked over at the table and saw Simoom sitting there already staring at them. Flame ignored her gaze as they walked back, before shooting her a scowl. Once they got back, Chromis leaped in the air with joy.

"I want Flame and Umber to hide next!" Chromis said. He assumed that Chromis hadn't seen what happened when he left, or just didn't understand it. Flame was calm at this point and was excited to get on with the game. He could feel the dried tears against his eyes.

"Are you sure?" Simoom asked. "Why don't I hide with Umber and you and Flame can find us?" Simoom suggested.

Flame knew that she liked Umber more, so this didn't come to much of a surprise to him. He was definitely offended that she still wouldn't let them hide together even after Chromis said he wanted them to, but he didn't want to say anything. He was already emotionally exhausted after spilling his heart out to Umber. He just wanted to cuddle him and fall asleep on his shoulder at this moment.

"I want Flame and Umber to hide though!" Chromis said. "It's my hatching day, so why can't they hide together?"

"It's complicated," Simoom said. "You'll understand one day."

"I don't even want to play this stupid game anymore then!" Chromis pouted.

Simoom looked at him hesitantly for a moment, probably assessing everything that could happen between Flame and Umber if they hid together.

"Fine!" she reluctantly agreed. "Flame, Umber, go hide. You have twenty seconds to find a spot so I can find you two before anything happens," she said while covering her eyes. "ONE!" she warned. Immediately, Umber started running as fast as he could toward the forest and Flame quickly followed.

Once they reached the forest, Flame saw Umber disappear into the many leaves and branches. He was roughly able to track Umber from the sound of his footsteps. All of a sudden, Umber's footsteps stopped. Flame immediately halted and looked around, confused about where he could have gone so suddenly. It was as if he had just disappeared into thin air, ceasing to exist.

"Umber?" Flame called out. "Where are yo-"

He was cut off when he felt talons grab his ankle, tripping him and beginning to pull him. It all happened so fast that Flame hardly had time to react. He was pulled into a hole that was hidden by a bush, just big enough for two dragons. It was dark and the bushes were thick and spiky, but he wasn't pricked thanks to his scales. He was about to reflexively blow fire at whatever had dragged him until he saw the outline of a dragon's face that looked extremely similar to Umber's.

"HEY!" Flame yelled. "Don't make me-...Umber?"

"It's me, Flame," Umber whispered. "Be quiet!"

"O-Okay!" Flame whispered back.

Flame could feel the warmth of Umber's scales. They had to cuddle up tight in order for both of them to be able to fit in this hole, but Flame didn't mind. This is where he wanted to be: alone with Umber for just a few minutes so that they could cuddle and Flame could recover his strength from before.

Flame began to rest his head on Umber's shoulder after a few minutes, realizing that he could just lay here like this until they inevitably found them. When Flame did this, Umber rested his head on top of his. They lay there, listening to the many birds chirping, squirrels climbing up trees, and other kinds of life scurrying around above them.

After a couple more minutes, he began to hear the footsteps of something larger than the occasional squirrel; actually, it was a few somethings. He guessed that it was Simoom and Chromis looking around, probably about to find them both any moment now. This

was confirmed when Flame heard a few voices begin to talk.

"Chromis, go check that patch of bushes over there, and I'll go check the trees for them," Simoom said. "It won't take long to find them, trust me. YOU HEAR THAT FLAME AND UMBER? WE'RE GOING TO FIND YOU IN A MINUTE SO MAKE SURE TO BE *PREPARED!*"

Does she really think all we do is make out? Flame thought. *Has she ever even been in love?*

"What exactly does she think we're doing?" Umber whispered.

"Who cares," Flame whispered back. "I just want to lay here and relax while it lasts."

They have had such a long day and Flame was already exhausted. They only got a few hours of sleep, stayed up most of the night making food, had to carry all of the food to the party, and now were expected to play hide and seek on a large beach with so many places to hide. Not to mention that he had just been crying his eyes out to Umber fifteen minutes ago and felt weak.

As he listened to the footsteps of Simoom, Chromis, and the many different animals above them, he felt a strange sense of calm fall over him. It was as if every worry he ever had was erased from his mind at that moment. His scales were absorbing the warmth of Umber's and all he could think about was how much he was dreading Simoom or Chromis finding them. He really needed this break; he had been working so hard to make everything perfect all day.

His eyes began to feel heavy as his head rested against Umber's shoulder. He was fading in and out of sleep, desperately trying to stay awake in case Simoom and Chromis didn't find them and they ended up sleeping there all night. After a while, he finally gave in to sleep and drifted off into peaceful darkness.

Flame opened his eyes with Umber's head still resting on his. After being confused for a moment, he quickly shot his head up, throwing Umber's up and against the dirt and instantly waking him up. He looked around and saw the sun was getting lower in the sky.

He popped his head up and out of the bush to confirm what he was looking at, and the sun was a little lower than before; this meant that they had been sleeping for at least an hour now. Before, the sun was around 45 degrees to the West which meant it was around three hours past noon. Now it was around 10 degrees lower than before.

"UMBER!" Flame yelled. "WAKE UP!"

"Geez, Flame," Umber said. "I was already awake once you slammed my head against the..." he trailed off. "How long have we been asleep?!"

"At least an hour?" Flame said.

"AN HOUR?!" Umber yelled. "WE NEED TO GET BACK!"

"Well no sh-" Flame stopped himself. "I mean obviously!" Umber didn't seem to notice this though, which Flame was relieved to realize.

Umber jumped out of the hole, pushing the thorny bush out of the way, and quickly began sprinting back the way they came from and Flame quickly followed. He did get pricked a couple of times while coming out, but he didn't say anything. In fact, he hardly felt it from the adrenaline that was pumping through his veins.

They stepped on many different twigs that made a *snap* under their talons and tripped on many different roots that were strutting out of the ground. They were punching and pushing and jumping through the forest as fast as they could, hoping that they weren't being looked for the whole time. While running, Flame accidentally kicked a crab. He thought it was pretty funny but quickly forgot about it when he remembered why they were running.

He could see the light through the trees now; they were close. As they neared the exit of the thick forest, they could see everyone except Avalanche sitting around the table, joking and laughing. He looked over at the platter of food and from what he could see, it was untouched. He was especially scared that Chromis might eat the pie before he could show it to Umber.

As they broke through the trees, they continued to sprint over to everyone. They all looked at them both as they got closer and Flame was expecting them to be happy that they were safe, but that didn't happen. They all almost looked unsurprised that they were back.

"Oh, hey!" Shrimp yelled. "We were waiting for you to uh...get done with whatever you were doing." Flame and Umber were both standing in front of the table now.

"Oh, yeah sorry," Umber said. "We kinda fell asleep while hiding," he panted.

"Mhmm," Simoom hummed.

"What did you tell them we were doing, Simoom?!" Flame demanded with a huff.

"Well, I-" Simoom was cut off.

"Look, it doesn't matter," Shrimp said. "We're just glad you got back on time. Avalanche should be back any minute now."

"Where did she go?" Umber questioned.

"She went to pick up Atlantic and Endwatcher," Shrimp said. "and a few other things," he winked.

She's getting that cake I bet, Flame thought. *Gross.*

Flame hated buttercream cakes because they were far too sweet for him. He hated the flavor, he hated how hard it got when chilled, and he hated the amount of sugar they added to it; he liked nothing about it and certainly wasn't going to act like he did.

More for Chromis... Flame thought. *And probably Umber, too.*

He went to sit down and put his head down and Umber sat next to him and cuddled beside him. He was still tired from before and was surprised that his sleepiness hadn't been fully taken away by the adrenaline he got when he woke up. He was going to try and get as much sleep as he could now while he had time. The moments right

before he fell asleep had been the calmest moments he had all day. Maybe even all week.

After a few minutes, he could hear multiple pairs of wings beating in the background. He knew exactly who it was without needing to even look up: Avalanche, Atlantic, and Endwatcher. He poked his head up to see them all flying toward them just as he expected. He noticed that Avalanche was holding a giant metal platter, much like the one Flame had, except it was only one plate instead of many.

He heard another pair of wings shoot up beside him, blowing air into his face and sending the many napkins that he had set up earlier flying. Chromis had flung himself into the air and collided with Atlantic and Endwatcher in the air. They began flying around and wrestling each other in the air.

Without a second thought, Flame started to stand up to grab the many napkins that he had sent flying all over the sand before Shrimp put his talons on his shoulder.

"Sit back down, Flame," Shrimp said. "I can pick them up. You've done enough today and I can tell you're clearly tired."

Flame didn't hesitate to sit down. He watched as Shrimp picked up each of the napkins. Flame held his talons out so that Shrimp could hand them over to him. He couldn't just sit there and watch him pick up each napkin when he could be helping. Reluctantly, Shrimp handed him the napkin and he put them back in the holder.

That's when Avalanche thumped down onto the sand with the metal platter in her talons. The rounded outside had been a little chilled, so he knew that it had to be pretty cold. Flame wanted to grab it for her, but he knew that she wouldn't let him either, so he didn't even try.

She set down the platter on the table, next to the food that Flame had made, and called for Chromis and his friends to come down.

"Chromis! Atlantic! Endwatcher!" she yelled. "Come down! We're all going to sing to Chromis soon!"

Without hesitation, they all barreled down toward the ground and came to a stop right before it, and thumped down on the sand. They ran over to the table and swiftly sat down while giggling and laughing together.

Thank the moons that Chromis has had a better dragonethood than me, Flame thought. He began smiling to himself about this and leaned against Umber and rested his head against his shoulder while looking around the table. Everyone was smiling and laughing, even Simoom.

Author's note: Okay, I had to add another emotional part because I'm a sucker for the parts like this haha. This chapter is out a little sooner than usual because I got pretty sick and all I had to do that day was write. Anyways, I hope I did everything right and made this chapter enjoyable. Once again, my dm's are always open for anything and you can dm me at Amisgal#8679.

Chapter 6

Flame's POV

Flame looked over at Umber who still had his head down. His eyes were closed and he looked as if he was slowly drifting to sleep. He listened to his slow, soft breaths while watching as his chest slowly rose and fell to the sounds of the wind on the shore. His entire body was still and looked at peace for the first time all day. The sounds of the waves mixed with the strong smell of sea salt and laughter that filled the air made everything feel relaxing; not nearly as relaxing as he was before he fell asleep though. This made him almost feel bad about having to wake him up to sing to Chromis, but he knew that he wouldn't mind. That didn't stop him from feeling sorry that he didn't get much sleep though. If he could, he would have taken all of the energy that he had gotten from his sleep and given it to Umber. He'd stay up for a week just so that Umber could get one night's rest if he had to.

"Umber, wake up," Flame whispered while patting Umber on the back. "we're about to sing to Chromis."

Umber poked his head up and looked around drowsily when he heard this and let out a sigh, realizing that they were at the beach. Flame thought that Umber might have been dreaming of being at home in bed, eating his favorite dish, or even flying through the sky. Umber loved flying since it gave him time to look around at the different plants, animals, and dragons. Flame especially loved flying; something about the cool wind slamming against his face and fluttering through his wings always made him feel at ease.

"O-Oh sorry, I forgot," Umber said.

This made Flame feel a little bit worse because now he knew that Umber was dreaming of doing something he loved. He didn't think about it too much though because he knew that Umber would never approve of him feeling bad over such simple things.

He looked around the table and saw Simoom had Chromis, Atlantic, and Endwatcher sitting to her right. Umber was sitting next to Endwatcher, Shrimp was next to Flame, and Avalanche was next to Shrimp which circled back around to Simoom. Flame was grateful that they didn't have to sit next to her; she radiated an aura that made Flame want to either punch her in the snout or retreat back to Umber to protect him from her.

"Okay, so the way we're doing this is we sing to Chromis, he gets a piece of cake, we give him his presents, and then I have a surprise for you three!" Avalanche said. "Once we're done eating everyone else can have a slice if they want."

WE FORGOT A PRESENT, Flame panicked. He looked over at Umber who had the same expression on his face. They had been so caught up in making the whole party perfect all week that they had completely forgotten to buy Chromis a present.

"We- uh...mom?" Flame said. "can I talk to you for a second? In private?"

"What is it Flame?" Avalanche questioned.

Flame quickly got on and walked over to Avalanche and pulled her aside to a different part of the beach that was out of earshot of everyone else. He knew that Umber knew exactly what he was talking to her about, so it didn't surprise him that he seemed like he was trying his hardest to eavesdrop.

"Make it quick," Avalanche said. "I don't want to keep Chromis waiting."

"We forgot to get a present!" Flame said.

"Oh, I know." Avalanche said. "That's why I got him one from all of us."

"R-Really?" Flame questioned.

"Of course! We know how hard you two have been working on this, so we knew that you'd forget," Avalanche said. "And also, if you were going to get something for Chromis you would've gotten it at

the store with that SeaWings present."

How did I forget a present for Chromis but not Starf! Flame thought.

Flame felt a huge wave of relief fall over him when he heard this. It felt as if he had just made a fifty-fifty shot at life and lived to tell the tale. He shot a look at Umber, trying to tell him that things were all good but ended up making some weird ugly face that Umber gave a confused look to. Flame quickly raced back to the table and sat back down next to Umber.

Umber was clenching his talons against the seat and he could practically hear his heart racing. He was making it pretty obvious that something was wrong and he hoped that nobody else had picked up on it and got suspicious.

"So?" Umber asked.

"Don't worry, she got us a present," Flame whispered. "She knew that we'd forget."

From Flame's view, he could also see the same reaction from Umber; a wave of relief falling over his whole body. His muscles went from tense to relaxed and his expression changed from looking panicked to relieved.

"So, any questions on how we're going to do this?" Avalanche questioned. There was a pause for a few seconds. "Alright then, let's sing to Chromis."

"Actually, I have a question," Flame said. "What are we singing to Chromis?"

"Happy Hatching Day, of course," Avalanche said. "What else would we be singing?"

Flame sat there for a second with a confused look on his face before Avalanche picked up on it, then it hit her like a truck. She had never celebrated any of Flame's hatching day parties and he had never been to one either. He never heard the song before and certainly never learned it from anyone else.

"Oh- uh...Umber?" Avalanche said. "Can you teach Flame the song quickly?"

"You...never taught him the song?" Umber questioned.

Avalanche just stood there with a look of guilt spread across her face. It was obvious that she didn't want to bring up the kind of mother she used to be toward Flame, so Umber backed off. It's not like he would have argued about it anyways since he hated arguing.

"Uhm, y-yeah, sure I can," Umber quickly backtracked. He turned towards Flame with sympathy written all over his face.

"While they're doing that, I'll light the candles," Avalanche said.

She reached for the handle at the top of the cake platter and lifted it. The cake was a mix of different reds, purples, and blues that perfectly matched Chromis's scales. It had writing on top of it in some kind of red goo that read "HAPPY FIRST HATCHING DAY CHROMIS". Flame assumed that she had the cake custom-made and had to pick it up from whoever had made it. She took a candle that she had stuffed in her wing that was shaped like a one and lightly blew a plume fire onto the top of it and stuck it in the middle of the cake.

"You two ready?" Avalanche said to Umber and Flame.

"Yep," Flame said.

"Alright," Avalanche said. "3, 2, 1!"

"Happy hatching day to you,

Happy hatching day to you,

Happy hatching day dear Chromis.

Happy hatching day to you!"

Flame felt a little embarrassed while singing this, but it made Chromis happy and that's all he really cared about in the end. The whole reason he went through all this trouble was for Chromis,

after all. A little song isn't so bad compared to all of the other things he's done to set everything up.

"Alright, blow out the candle!" Avalanche said.

Chromis then took the biggest breath that he could and watched as he blew. The candle didn't go out because he really didn't blow all that hard, so he did it again, and again, and again until Flame got tired of watching and blew it out for him.

"Yay! Woohoo!" They all screamed.

Flame saw his face and could definitely tell that he was having fun so far. He had a big smile on his face and some of his scales were emitting a slight blue hue. This got even bigger when he watched as Avalanche grabbed one of the plates and carefully cut a piece out of the cake and plopped it on the plate for him.

"Wait! Before you eat that, I have one last thing for you," Avalanche said. "This is from me, Flame, and Umber."

"But I want to eat the cake," Chromis said.

"You can't have your talons full of icing for this though," Avalanche said. "You can eat it right after, I promise."

"Fine," Chromis reluctantly agreed.

Avalanche opened her wing and pulled out some sort of scroll and handed it over to Chromis who immediately opened it, probably wanting to eat the cake. Flame could see the excited shine in his eyes that glittered like gold when he realized what it was. It looked like the scroll had just given him all of the answers to all of the secrets of Pyrrhia. Just from his face, Flame could tell that whatever she had just given him had to be good. He felt a little bad that he forgot to get him something, but was grateful at the same time that Avalanche got something that was from all of them.

"Well?" Avalanche said. "Show everyone!" she said with a smile.

Chromis turned the scroll around so that everyone could see it. Immediately, Flame recognized it was a graphicoll. Not the ones in

the style he usually got; the words were bigger and simpler compared to the graphicolls he had. The language wasn't complicated either. From the few lines that Flame was able to read before Chromis turned the scroll back around, he could tell that the scroll used much easier words than his did.

I should've been reading these to Umber! He thought. *This would have helped him way more than telling him to read the more advanced ones!*

"It's just like the ones Flame has!" Chromis smiled. "I love it! Best hatching day ever!"

Flame could only imagine how Avalanche was feeling right now. She finally had the chance to redeem herself after messing up with Flame as much as she did and there was a big smile across her face when she heard it. If Flame wasn't as exhausted as he was, he'd probably be happier for her than he was now. Just looking over at Umber made him think of lying against him in their bed and falling asleep in an instant.

"I'm glad you like it," Avalanche said with a smile.

"Can you read it to me, Flame?" Chromis looked over at Flame.

"Shrimp probably could," Avalanche paused. "...underwater."

"But...the water will ruin it..." Chromis said.

"That's why we got the waterproof paper!" Avalanche said. Her eyes were full of excitement as if she had been waiting to tell him about it for years.

"REALLY!?" Chromis exclaimed.

"Yup, we can read it underwater together as long as you want," Shrimp said.

"Can we go read it now?" Chromis asked.

"After dinner," Shrimp said. "and after we play that surprise that your mom and I planned."

"Fine," Chromis agreed. "Wait, surprise? What are we doing? Is it another present? Is it more cake? I'd love more cake!"

He's really starting to sound like Umber, Flame thought. *That is totally something Umber would say. At least he's keeping his appetite under control right now. I bet he can't wait for dinner*.

"I'm glad you asked," Shrimp said. "You three are going to be finding the lost treasure of this beach!"

Flame looked at him, confused. He had never mentioned anything about a surprise before, especially not one that included "lost beach treasure". Simoom looked pretty excited about it, so Flame assumed that she probably knew beforehand.

Is it some sort of surprise for me and Umber too? I've never been interested in any "treasure hunts" before though, so why tell Simoom and not us? Flame thought. *Maybe they don't trust us? No, maybe they didn't want us to insist on doing it because they knew we would be exhausted.*

"Rumor has it that a dragon hid a treasure chest full of mysterious items thousands of years ago," Avalanche said. "and we just so happen to have the map!"

"That's so cool!" Endwatcher said.

"Well once we find it, I'll share whatever is in it with you since I'm so generous," Chromis said.

"I'm glad you're so kind," Atlantic said sarcastically.

Flame stared at them all and could tell that they were having a good time and that Chromis had good friends. At least he wouldn't grow up as he did; lashing out at the world and blaming everyone else because his mother disregarded him. At least he had made up with her though and was trying to be better.

He walked over to Shrimp and could tell that he immediately knew what he was going to say to him. He recognized the look of concern from Umber and knew that he didn't want him helping, but that wasn't going to stop him from asking.

It's the least I can do, he thought.

"Flame, I'm not letting you help us with this," Shrimp said. "I think you and Umber have done enough today. You can go home to sleep if you want. I'm sure Chromis would understand."

"C'mon! I'm not even that tired!" Flame protested. "I think I should help you. It's the least I could do-"

"Flame, go to sleep. Please," Shrimp interjected. "You've already done the "least you can do". Actually, you've probably done the most you can do by now."

"Just this one last thing! I'll go to sleep after, I promise!" Flame begged

"No," Shrimp said. "Go get some sleep."

Flame looked at Shrimp's face and once again, he recognized the look. It was just like how Umber looked when he begged him to stop pushing himself or bottling up his feelings. The scene from earlier played in his head at super speed as he remembered all of the emotions he was feeling at the same time. He realized that it wasn't just Umber he hated seeing with that face; it was everyone.

"Okay fine," Flame said softly. "sorry."

"What?" Shrimp said. "No, don't apologize. Just...go rest."

"We still aren't going home though," Flame said. "right, Umber?"

"Yeah," Umber yawned. "we can just sleep in the sand or something."

"We'll do that then," Flame said. "C'mon, Umber."

"If you insist," Shrimp sighed.

They both stood up from their seats and looked around the beach for a spot. There were so many places to choose from, but he had to think about it. They were all going to do a treasure hunt, so they had to be far enough away so they didn't interfere with anything. It

also had to be close enough so that they weren't too close to the other dragons down the beach. There were certainly many dragons down there; Flame could hear their roars while he and Umber were looking for a place to rest.

Eventually, they found the perfect spot. It was far enough away from the party site so that they didn't mess anything up, and up the beach enough so that they wouldn't be bothered by the screams of the dragons or worse; get shaken awake by a dragonet or "unapproving" dragon. It was also close to the water, so they could lay there and enjoy the calming sounds of the waves and heat from the sun. It was getting dark though and the sun was beginning to set. That made the dinner better though; they both preferred eating when it was dark out; it gave a better feel to eating outside when you couldn't see much in his opinion. They began clearing out all of the rocks, throwing them to the side just like Avalanche and Shrimp had done for the party site.

He could see Simoom walking towards them in the distance. He was about to say something when he saw her sit down and rest her head on her talons as she shot them a growl.

The hell is wrong with her-, he thought. *I bet Avalanche or Shrimp made her watch us! Take that, bitch!*

Once it was clear, they both laid their head against the soft sand next to each other. They were both lying on their right side with Flame facing Umber's back, so he habitually wrapped one of his wings around him and intertwined their tails. It's not like it was cold, not by any means. But he knew that Umber enjoyed this, so he pulled Umber closer until Flame's belly was touching his scales. His mind immediately started wandering through many different thoughts as he slowly slipped away into blissful peace. He couldn't tell if it was the exhaustion or the fact that he was glad to finally be laying down, but he felt like he was in dragon heaven at this moment; the waves in the background and the slight breeze that was blowing against each of his scales made him feel at ease. The sun felt like a warm blanket made up of Umber's scales being wrapped around his whole body like a jacket.

He could finally relax.

Chromis's POV

"Can we do the treasure hunt now?" Chromis asked impatiently.

"Just wait for Flame and Umber to find a spot to sleep," Shrimp said, "They stayed up all night making the food."

"Fine!" Chromis complained.

"Simoom," Shrimp called out. "can you make sure that nobody disturbs Flame and Umber while we're on this hunt? I know you don't like them, but they've worked so hard on this and at least deserve some sleep."

Simoom stared at him with a look of anger for a few seconds before speaking up.

"You want me to watch those two stupid dragons?" She pointed at Flame and Umber. "You realize they made out in front of Chromis, right?"

"Oh my moons Simoom," Shrimp said. "You're still caught up on that? I bet Chromis has completely forgotten about it by now! Just-watch them until we get back and stop holding grudges! We won't be long."

"Fine. I'll watch your stupid step-son and his stupid boyfriend sleep while you go on a treasure hunt," Simoom pouted.

"Thank you," Shrimp thanked. Simoom was already walking towards them and was barely in earshot when he said it.

Chromis watched as Flame and Umber began clearing out rocks from a spot by the water. They were throwing them off to the side in a pile and he couldn't help but wonder why. Many ideas came to mind but none of them seemed reasonable enough to be true.

"What are they doing with the rocks?" Atlantic asked. "I mean, I get they're in love or whatever but why are they collecting them?"

"They aren't collecting them," Avalanche said. "you'll see later."

Then, they then both laid down in the sand. They got unusually close to each other, but he assumed it was probably because they were cold. He had never seen Avalanche and Shrimp do this though, so he got a little confused. Then, he watched Flame wrap one of his wings around Umber; it almost covered his entire body. Compared to Chromis, Umber was massive.

So they are cold, Chromis thought. *How can they be cold when it's so hot outside?*

After a few minutes, they both went still; so still that Chromis thought that they were dead until he saw Flame's wing twitch a little. He assumed that they were both asleep and then his mind instantly began racing through all of the different things they would find in the buried treasure chest.

I wish they would do it with us, Chromis thought. *Oh well. More treasure for me!*

"Are they finally sleeping?" Endwatcher asked.

"Looks like it." Shrimp paused and studied them for a few seconds. "Yup, definitely sleeping. Who's ready to find this treasure?

"ME!" Chromis, Atlantic, and Endwatcher screamed at the same time.

"Shhh," Avalanche shushed. "Don't wake them up."

Avalanche started pulling the last thing out of her wing. It was another scroll and Chromis could see some ink that was soaking through the paper. It was beat up and looked like it had been sitting around for thousands of years. There were some ripped spots, it had stains on it, and the paper looked fragile; it looked like just holding it would make it crumple in your talons like a pile of ash barely being held together. Just the sight of the old map made him get an excited feeling in his chest. He just wanted to grab it and open it already and study every line of ink he saw until he could pinpoint the treasure.

He watched as she unrolled it carefully, revealing a map with many

intricate lines that detailed the surrounding area. There was one thing that confused him though; as detailed as the map was, a few of the locations had been drawn over with drawings that looked like they had been pulled out of his coloring books. The map had an "X" on a certain location and Chromis assumed that it had to be the location of the map. His excitement had only grown. It felt like a tsunami that was banging against his insides, begging to be let out.

Maybe the dragon knew we'd find it someday! Chromis thought. Maybe it was a NightWing that wrote it when they could tell the future!

"Ooh!" Chromis exclaimed. "Let's hurry up and find it! The treasure can't wait all day!"

"Shhh!" Avalanche shushed again. "They won't be happy if you wake them up! Here, look," Avalanche pointed to a part of the map. "It says that the treasure is somewhere in the forest. You can be as loud as you want once we get there."

"Okay," Chromis agreed. "Let's hurry up though. I want to find the treasure already!"

"The treasure isn't going anywhere, Chromis," Shrimp said.

"What if someone finds it before us though?" Chromis worried. "Then none of us will get anything!"

"Nobody's finding it without this map." Avalanche held out the map in front of Chromis and pointed at the "X". "don't worry."

"Still, let's hurry!" Chromis said.

He started darting toward the forest, kicking up sand and debris with every step. Excitement ran through his whole body like a strange jolt of energy from a rogue lightning bolt that struck him, giving him even more motivation to run every time he thought about it. A few times, he swore he could see the leaves move in a way that looked like it was waving for him to come closer; like the forest was calling for him to search it for the mysterious lost treasure.

He could hear the many stomps of everyone following behind him. It wasn't long until Avalanche and Shrimp caught up and Endwatcher and Atlantic were still far behind. He looked back and could see them running as fast as they could and Atlantic was in front of Endwatcher. He couldn't tell if that was because she was faster than he was, or realized faster than he did. Ultimately, he ended up guessing that she just realized faster because Endwatcher was definitely faster than she was; he's seen him outrun her multiple times whenever they played tag.

"Slow down!" Atlantic frantically yelled. Chromis just kept running though because he knew it would be worth it in the end.

He finally reached the forest and started pushing different leaves out of the way while getting slapped in the face by twigs. He was running as fast as he could until he felt a pair of talons grab his shoulder.

"Okay, Chromis," Shrimp said. "I think it's time to slow down now."

"But the treasure is waiting!" Chromis argued. "We can't let any other dragons take it before us!"

"For the last time, nobody else is going to find it," Shrimp assured. "Remember, we have the map and they don't. Besides, we're going to lose Atlantic and Endwatcher if we don't slow down."

"Fine!" Chromis huffed.

As they waited, he stood there and stared at the scenery. He thought there was probably a reason Flame and Umber liked looking at it so much, so he was going to give it a go while he had time. There were leaves falling around him and he listened in on the sounds of animals trampling the leaves and twigs, running up trees, but he didn't feel calm, he didn't feel relaxed, he didn't feel anything except annoyed that he had to wait for Atlantic and Endwatcher to catch up.

How do they love this so much? Chromis thought. *This is so stupid!*

After a few more seconds of standing there and waiting, he could

hear footsteps behind them, crumpling leaves under their talons and swatting branches to the side. As he was listening, he spotted a crab in the dirt that had its shell cracked and it was lying upside down, presumably dead.

Weird, he thought.

That's when Endwatcher and Atlantic finally caught up, panting as they skidded to a stop a few feet away from Chromis. Endwatcher was covered in mud on one side, and the other was perfectly clean. He was spitting out mud while panting at the same time.

"What happened to you?" Chromis pointed at Endwatcher.

"I might have fallen into a mud puddle." Endwatcher said. The look on his face showed that he was obviously embarrassed. "I got most of it off, but a lot is stuck in between my scales."

"We can go play in the water after!" Atlantic suggested. "Then you can get all that mud off of you and we can play a game!"

Chromis knew what game they would play and based on Endwatcher's unamused look, he knew too. They were going to make him play a game that was nearly impossible for him to win, and he never has; not once. They would challenge him to catch them in the water while they swam circles around him while mocking him the whole time.

"The map says that the treasure is right up here!" Avalanche said. "Follow me!" she said, bursting into a sprint.

"Gah! More running?!" Endwatcher complained.

"Suck it up," Atlantic said. "We're about to find treasure that's been hidden for thousands of years!"

"Whatever," Endwatcher scoffed.

Endwatcher then started into a light jog, while Atlantic and Chromis began sprinting and passed him almost immediately. They could hear Avalanche's footsteps ahead and tried to follow as best as they could. They tripped over a couple of roots a few times but

managed to stagger back up into their sprint.

Then, they heard Avalanche's footsteps come to a complete stop and they almost crashed into her tail. He looked past her and sitting there in the dirt was a massive x carved out. Chromis realized that this must be the place where the treasure was and he quickly began digging at it.

"Here it is!" Chromis said. His talons were digging at the dirt and were throwing dirt behind him already. "Come on! Help me you two!"

Immediately, Atlantic began digging up the large "X" with him while Endwatcher stood there thinking if he wanted to get even dirtier.

"Don't just stand there Endwatcher," Atlantic said. "help us!"

"I don't want to get dirt under my talons!" Endwatcher said. "I hate how it feels."

"Wah, wah," Chromis mocked. "Help us or you won't get anything!"

"Gah! Fine!" Endwatcher reluctantly agreed.

They were all digging now, digging up dirt into a huge pile behind them. It took them at least 30 minutes to dig and the hole was at least 4 feet deep now. Avalanche and Shrimp were sitting down by now, staring at them as they dug. That's when they hit it; a weird wooden box with a golden band that went from either side of the chest both ways was now visible from underneath the dirt and they all began digging even faster.

"That's it!" Atlantic said. "There's the treasure!"

"I wonder what's inside!" Chromis said.

Excitement and adrenaline were running through his whole body now that spread at the same speed as shock and disgust did when Flame told him where eggs came from. He began wondering what could be inside and was digging at the dirt harder than ever now as his mind raced through all the things they could do with whatever

was inside the strange golden chest.

Maybe there's animus touched items in here! Maybe there's gold! I can't wait to see what's inside! he thought.

At last, the dirt around the chest was finally gone and it could be taken out with ease at a glance. Chromis tried to lift it, but it was far too heavy for him to lift and he only ended up getting it a few inches in the air before dropping it, sending him back in a stumble.

"It's really heavy!" Chromis said. "Help me lift it!"

Immediately, Atlantic and Endwatcher put their talons around the top of the chest and Chromis did the same a few seconds later, once he was able to get back up. Still, they weren't able to get the chest out of the hole; there wasn't enough space for them to get a good grip on the dirt and they all ended up dropping it.

"Mom, Dad," Chromis called. "Can you help us lift this out?"

"Sure, but you have to give us some if we do," Avalanche said.

"Ugh! Fine!" Chromis reluctantly agreed.

With ease, Avalanche reached down and gripped her talons around the chest and plopped it on the ground, sending debris all over. The gold on the chest wasn't sparkling like gold though which Chromis thought was weird, but he didn't pay much attention to it; he was too distracted by the fact that there was a chest that was thousands of years old sitting in front of them.

He slowly reached his talons closer to the chest, gripped the latch on the front, and flipped it open. To his surprise, the chest had a bunch of scrolls in it. They didn't look beat up, or even old for that matter, so he immediately got confused.

"These don't look very old..." Chromis said.

"Open one!" Avalanche said excitedly.

He quickly grabbed one of the scrolls and opened it from both sides. He instantly recognized what was in the scroll; more graphicolls.

Except this one didn't have any big special letters on it or simple and easy words. It had small, long, compressed words that he could hardly read. At this, he realized that the chest wasn't thousands of years old nor was there any gold or animus touched objects in it; it was another surprise that they set up.

"I got you a collection of them!" Avalanche admitted. "Some of them are harder than the others, and some of them are easy! I got them so you can learn to read better because I know how much you enjoy them!"

But...I promised to give Endwatcher and Atlantic some of them, he thought.

He handed the scroll he was holding over to Endwatcher's clean talon who shot him a confused look.

"I told you that we would split them, so that's what we're doing," Chromis said. "...after we go swim!"

"Wha- really?" Atlantic said. "Don't you want to collect them all?"

"There's plenty here for us all!" Chromis paused. "But we can worry about splitting them once we get back from the water."

"Yes! I love the water," Atlantic screamed.

"Are you gonna make me play that stupid game again?" Endwatcher said.

"Pleeease! Just one last time," Atlantic begged. "I'm sure you'll get one of us this time!"

"...Gah! Fine," Endwatcher hesitated. "One more time and I'm done playing this game."

"Race you to the water!" Atlantic said.

Chromis watched as both of his friends bolted away. He could hear twigs and leaves cracking and crumpling under their talons as they ran. He couldn't help but feel happy that he had a way to thank them for being his friends. After all, Chromis was horrible at first

impressions.

"Thank you," Chromis said softly, leaning in for a hug from Avalanche and Shrimp. they hugged back and could feel their massive talons wrap around his back as he stood on his hind legs.

"You're welcome, sweetheart," Avalanche said. "Now go play with your friends! They're going to realize you aren't there soon!"

"Okay!" Chromis then pulled away and began bolting through the forest.

He took off through the forest and began to hear the footsteps of Atlantic and Endwatcher in front of him after a few minutes. He was jumping over roots, being careful not to trip and fall into mud like Endwatcher had done. Eventually, he caught up with the two just as they were leaving the forest.

"SLOWPOKES!" he yelled as he passed them. "I GAVE YOU A HEADSTART AND STILL CAUGHT UP!"

He was treading through the sand at this point, kicking it up as he desperately tried to make it to the water before Atlantic or Endwatcher. He was really tired at this point, but he couldn't stop now; he was far too close and had caught up too fast to just give up.

He jumped in the water and sent it splashing around in tiny drops as Atlantic and Endwatcher made it to the shore. They both eventually jumped in with him and Chromis could immediately notice how much cleaner Endwatcher's scales looked now that they weren't covered in mud.

He splashed water in Atlantic's face and she splashed back, and then Endwatcher joined in and they started to have a splashing battle. The water was warmer than earlier when he went in while Flame and Umber were away. He and Simoom played tag, which Chromis had obviously won.

That's when Chromis went underwater and grabbed Atlantic's ankle and began dragging her under. She must have forgotten that she could breathe underwater because she struggled for a few seconds

before letting Chromis take her. He dragged her a couple of meters away from Endwatcher and immediately stopped the splashing battle that was happening. He popped back up with Atlantic by his side and looked Endwatcher dead in the eyes.

"You ready, Endwatcher?" Chromis asked.

"Wait-" Endwatcher said.

"Too late!" Atlantic went under the water and immediately began bolting through it at lightning speed.

"That's your queue to swim!" Chromis said and immediately went under the water and swam in the opposite direction of Atlantic.

Endwatcher bolted under the water as fast as his arms and wings would take him. He couldn't breathe underwater or swim super fast as Chromis or Atlantic could, so he would try to trick them with mind games. They never worked, but it was the only way he was going to get a chance at catching one of them.

Chromis watched as he swam as hard as he could toward him with his face full of determination. He always found it funny how hard he would try to catch one of them. It was as if Chromis couldn't swim circles around him as if it was nothing.

He had only made it a few meters before Chromis watched him go back up to the surface, gasping for air. He looked up and could see Endwatcher gleaming down through the clear blue water at him with a death stare. His glare looked like he was a deadly predator ready to strike, except he was in someone else's hunting grounds. His snout was wrinkled and he looked like he was getting angry at the fact that they somehow managed to drag him into this game again. He had his talons clenched and looked like he was about ready to punch Chromis in the snout to which he lit up his scales in a way that translated to "come catch me" in Aquatic.

This was the only Aquatic that Endwatcher knew and that's because Chromis had taught it to him over time. He had done it so many times that Endwatcher eventually asked him what it meant, so he told him. Endwatcher's face only got angrier at seeing him do this.

Chromis watched as he plunged under the water, barreling towards him as fast as he could. Chromis had swam up a couple of feet, so he was near the surface of where Endwatcher was. His talons were only a couple of inches from touching Chromis when he quickly darted out of the way and sent him flying with a quick whip of his tail. Atlantic had come over to join at this point and they were both swimming circles around him. As he spun around for a second, he quickly recovered and leaped toward Atlantic. She quickly lit her scales up, momentarily blinding Endwatcher before she swam away again. He quickly started racing back up to the surface for another breath of air.

"Should we let him catch us this time?" Atlantic flashed in Aquatic.

"You can let catch..." Chromis paused, trying to think of how to flash his scales next. "...you, not me," He slowly flashed.

He wasn't very fluent in Aquatic, but he could speak it. He focused on Dragon more than Aquatic since he almost never had to speak Aquatic to anyone except Shrimp or Atlantic, and they didn't mind anyways so it didn't matter too much.

"No thanks," Atlantic flashed back.

That's when Chromis felt a rush of water against his shoulder, followed by a set of talons gripping his scales. He quickly looked up and saw Endwatcher staring at him with his arm outstretched and his talons gripping his shoulder. A look of glee quickly formed on his face and Chromis began to feel stupid for letting himself get distracted so easily. He wasn't the most fluent in Aquatic, so speaking it took him longer than other SeaWings and that's why Endwatcher caught him; he was too distracted from thinking about how to say what he was going to say.

Endwatcher raced back up to the surface as fast as he could and Chromis could already tell what was about to happen once he got up there with him. He made sure to go nice as slow about it; it was like his swim of shame. He looked over at Atlantic who was already laughing about it and bubbles were coming from her mouth as she did.

He looked back up and could see the black outline of Endwatcher staring at him and could faintly see his face; it was full of glee and triumph, with a little bit of mischief mixed in. His mouth was already open and Chromis knew exactly what he was preparing to say as soon as his head poked out of the water.

At last, Chromis finally reached the surface and reluctantly poked his head out of the water. At first, he thought that Endwatcher wasn't going to say anything after a couple seconds, but then his hopes were crushed. Crushed like a boulder had just fallen on top of him and pinned him to the ocean bed and he was stuck in place for the rest of his life.

"I KNEW I WOULD GET YOU! TAKE THAT CHROMIS!" Endwatcher said. "That's what you get for making me play this stupid game so many times!" Then Endwatcher did something unexpected. Atlantic was already at the surface and he gave her a high five.

Did she have something to do with this?! Chromis thought. *I am so going to get her back if she did!*

"Told you it would work!" Atlantic said.

"I KNEW IT!" Chromis exclaimed. "You were planning something, weren't you?!"

"Well, duh," Atlantic said. "I got tired of seeing Endwatcher lose, so I let him win. Obviously I wouldn't let him tag me, so I took advantage of your poor Aquatic."

"That's not fair!" Chromis complained. "You can't just take advantage of me like that!"

"All's fair in life," Endwatcher said. "Especially when it was unfair to begin with."

"Whatever," Chromis scoffed.

"OKAY, IT'S TIME FOR DINNER YOU THREE!" Avalanche yelled.

"Coming!" they all said at the same time.

Author's note: Okay, once again I had to stop going into detail and actually had to remove an entire part (which I will include next chapter) because it was over 7k words haha. I love the love-hate relationship between Endwatcher and his friends too, I think it's really cute! Also, this would've been uploaded yesterday but I was going through something, got sick, and even lost my "k" key (all happening in order haha). Also, yay! Chromis POV! He was pretty fun to develop haha.

Chapter 7

This scene gets very graphic, so discretion is advised as it details how Crane died with a considerable amount of detail and will be marked with bold.

Umber's POV

"They're surrounding us!" Marsh blew the biggest flame he could at the crowd of IceWings who dodged out of the way just in time.

Umber was panicking now. IceWings were surrounding them and closing in as the seconds passed. Their eyes were full of courage and triumph and it was as if time was slowing to a halt as he looked around. The shiny metal tips of their spears glinted and then slowly faded as a cloud covered the sun just like the last bit of hope he had to get out of this situation alive had done mere seconds ago. He was preparing for the long and agonizing death these IceWings would put them through as he looked around to catch one more glimpse of his sibs before he was inevitably killed.

"Stay calm and remember your training!" Reed yelled. "Stay in position and cover each other!"

Reed had always been a good brother to Umber. He always listened to him, they made jokes, picked fun at each other, and played games together often. But right now, he knew that deep down Reed was sure that this was the end of them as much as he did, but he also knew that he had to be the bigwings they always admired so much. Even in panic he somehow seemed to stay calm for them because if he was calm, he knew they would be too, but not Umber. Being the smallest in the group made him an easy target, and he definitely noticed it. Reed had saved his life so many times that it was hard to keep track, but not anymore. Nobody was coming to save him now and he was sure of it.

He looked around at the IceWings as he tried to remember each and every one of their faces so that he could come back in the afterlife and take revenge. As much as he wanted to though, he couldn't be mad; he could only sympathize for them because he knew that this wasn't their choice. They were ordered by Queen Glacier to do this and if they didn't, they would probably lose everything they cared about most.

No more fighting, no more running. This is it, he thought.

One of the IceWings lunged at him with their spear in talon, ready to pierce it through his scales. He swore he could feel his heart jump through his chest, but all he did was close his eyes and try to remember every good memory of him and his sibs because he didn't want his final moments to be filled with fear.

After a few seconds, he opened his eyes and took a second glance at everything around him. He double-checked by feeling around all of his scales and checking his talons to see if he was still alive. He didn't feel any pain, but he was suspicious that it might be the initial shock that had numbed him for now.

Am I dead? he wondered. *And if I'm not, then am I dying?*

Everything seemed to be fine and just like it was before. It was as if he had somehow unlocked his inner animus and had cast a spell for him and his sibs to live. A huge wave of relief fell over his whole body and his wings began to feel weak once he realized that he was still alive. This relief was short-lived though as he finally registered what was happening. Crane was in the IceWing's talons that had lunged at him before, and there was blood soaking her scales. It wasn't IceWing blood though, it was far too red to be IceWing blood; It was Crane's blood and there was a massive cut on her throat and there was blood spilling from it. It turns out that she tackled the IceWing mid-air and struggled for a few seconds before eventually getting overpowered.

The IceWing was staring at him with a big smile spread across her face. Her eyes were as cold as her scales and her gaze made Umber feel like he was pinned down with no other options but

to stay where he was, frozen in place.

"C-Crane...?" Umber muttered as tears began pouring from his face.

"Now's our chance!" Reed yelled "Retreat!"

Through his tears, he saw Reed begin to bolt towards the ground, then Marsh, then Sora, then Pheasant. He looked around not knowing what to do. He didn't want to leave her, but what choice did he have? It's not like he could save her or he would certainly be killed. Being all out of options and in a state of complete panic again, he passed out. Right before he did though, he watched the IceWing let go of Crane and watched her limp body fall through the air. He woke up a few seconds later, falling through the sky, and realized that a few drops of blood dripped on his snout, then more, and more, until his whole body was drenched in blood. It was as if somehow someone had poured a massive bucket of it on him while he was falling.

A few seconds later, he hit the ground with a thud but it didn't hurt nor did he feel the heat of the sun against his scales anymore. In fact, he felt liquid submerging at least half of his body as he landed.

He quickly stood up and took a quick glance around and realized that he was in a black abyss. He was standing in a thin pool of red liquid that was only a few feet deep that wreaked of iron and seemed to stretch for miles.

"H-Hello?" he called out. His voice echoed back to him a few times before going quiet.

Then, he heard a splash followed by a wave of the red liquid washing over him, covering him even more than before. The liquid was red and thick and felt and smelled extremely similar to blood and was almost sickening. As confused as he was, his mind was immediately pulled to whatever had fallen a couple of seconds ago.

He quickly ran over to whatever had fallen into the liquid and saw Crane's body lying there and he could distinctly make out the cut even more than before. Her eyes were wide and her pupils were dilated, but there was movement and he could see that she was tracking Umber's every move.

"**Crane!" Umber yelled. "Come on! Get up! The others are waiting for us!" he cried. "Please get up! You're fine, right? It's just a scratch, right? Crane?!"**

"**It's gonna be OK, Umber," Crane said softly, gurgling up blood with every word. "Go win this war for me, alright?"**

"**NO!" Umber yelled, falling on top of Crane, closing his eyes as his scales met hers. "Please...please don't go. You can't go!" His whimpers were echoing through the endless void as he watched Crane's eyes slowly close and her body go completely still.**

"Umber?" a voice called out in the distance. "Are you alright? Umber?"

Umber opened his eyes to familiar yellow sand and immediately shot his head up as his hearing slowly came back. He could hear the ocean waves in the background and could feel his heart pumping through his chest. It was dark outside now and he could feel the cold against his scales.

He quickly backed up a few steps before he reflexively began to build up fire in the back of his throat, letting out a hissing sound. He was on high alert after seeing what he did and his war instincts were taking over as fear, panic, and extreme sadness ran through his whole body. There was no second of hesitation like usual whenever he was scared awake like this. It was just like how it was back at war when he was wired to be on high alert constantly.

"Woah, Umber!" the voice said. "Calm down, it's Flame! I heard you crying or something, so I woke you up."

"F-Flame?" Umber let go of the fire he was about to unleash.

He realized that the scales under his eyes were soaked with tears now and he could still feel them pouring down his face. He looked over at where he was sleeping in the sand and could see a big spot where the sand was darker than the rest. He realized that it must've been where his tears had soaked into the sand. Right now, he was so lost and confused and couldn't tell what was real and what was fake. Something about Flame though, real or fake, made him feel safe. He has never had a nightmare about him and he hopes he never will.

"I'm so sorry!" Umber cried.

More tears began rolling down his face as he crumpled to the ground, letting out whimpers as he did. All he could think about was how he almost just lit his favorite dragon in Pyrrhia on fire and that he had just watched Crane die in front of him again when he felt a familiar set of talons on his shoulders.

"A-Are you okay?" Flame said. "Pardon my French, but holy shit Umber. I've never seen you snap like that before."

"I-I just had a nightmare," Umber said, forcing himself to stop crying.

"That was more than *just a nightmare*," Flame said. "I've never even seen you begin to use your fire before, let alone directed at me!" He began to wrap his wings around Umber. "If something's wrong then you need to tell me."

"Don't worry! I just had a really scary nightmare and you startled me when you woke me up is all. It's nothing!" Umber said. "Now stop swearing! I'll give you a pass this time because I almost lit you on fire, but no more swearing!"

"OKAY, IT'S TIME FOR DINNER YOU THREE!" Avalanche yelled.

He looked over at the table and could see Simoom, Avalanche, and Shrimp all sitting down in their respective seats from before. None of them seemed to realize the freakout he just had, and he was thankful because he never wanted anyone to see him as he had just been especially Flame.

"Alright, let's go eat dinner now! I'm starving!" Umber said before Flame could say anything. He wouldn't dare look Flame in the face and see the worry.

Umber began walking toward the table with his head down, wiping away the tears so that nobody suspected what was happening. He took a minute to calm down and collect his thoughts on the way over so that nobody would begin to ask questions. He wasn't very good at this though because he always felt vulnerable around Flame, but not this time; not with this. He finally reached his seat and sat down.

"Oh, hey you two!" Avalanche said. "We were just about to wake you up! Anyways, we're going to eat now so get ready to blow Chromis and his friends away with your cooking!"

"Yeah, we just woke up a little early is all." Flame shot a glare at Umber.

"Yep, must be our internal clock or something." Umber laughed nervously.

That's when Endwatcher and Atlantic came running over to the table. Their scales were wet, but they had obviously shaken off beforehand. Chromis was far behind them walking slowly toward the table. He obviously wasn't in a good mood but Umber knew it couldn't be worse than what he was feeling right now, so he didn't feel too bad. Unlike Endwatcher's and Atlantic's scales, his were soaking wet, leaving a trail of dark sand with every step.

"Stop being a sore loser!" Atlantic yelled.

"You cheated though! I gave you my scrolls and then you repay me by plotting against me behind my back!" Chromis yelled back.

Scrolls? Is that what that treasure hunt was about? More scrolls? he thought.

"Wah, wah," Endwatcher mocked. "Get over here already! I heard your brother can cook and I'm hungry!" he paused. "You can cook, right?" he asked Flame.

"I mean, I guess you could say that," Flame said. "It wouldn't be as good though without Umber's help though, right Umber?" Flame shot him a glare.

Why are you putting me on the spot like this?! he thought. *Maybe he wants to distract me?*

"Uhm...y-yea," Umber said. "I don't do much though, I just help him mix the spices and sauce and stuff."

"You do plenty!" Flame corrected. "It'd take hours more without your help!"

"Oh whatever," Umber said. "He just says that to make me feel like my job is more important than it actually is," he not-so-quietly whispered to Atlantic and Endwatcher to which they giggled a little.

Chromis had gotten over to the table at this point and swiftly sat down with a pout. His scales were soaked so he started getting the table wet.

"Go shake off!" Avalanche rushed. "Quickly before you get the table soaked!"

Umber watched as Chromis ran a few meters from the table, shook off, then stomped his way back and sat down. He was obviously still not happy, but at least he wasn't throwing a temper tantrum.

Umber looked over at Flame's face and saw a slight smile begin to form. That's when Umber realized what Flame was doing, and that was to make him feel better and try to distract him from whatever he had seen, which meant he saw right through his lie. It was definitely working though; he felt far better than he did a few minutes ago. He wasn't tired anymore, but he assumed that it was just the adrenaline because the sleep he did get was definitely not enough.

"How long were we asleep?" Umber asked.

"Almost two hours I think," Endwatcher said.

The image of Crane's body flashed in his head, along with what she had said to him to which he winced a little. He couldn't help but often wish that it had been him instead. Icicle was going for him after all, so he thought that it must've been just a strange twist of fate.

But Flame wouldn't be how he is now! He thought. *It's a lose-lose situation...Gah! Why can't anything just be simple?!*

"Is everyone ready?" Avalanche questioned now that everyone was sitting down, to which everyone either nodded or said yes. "Alright then. Flame, Umber, you both can open it first since you made it."

Umber reached his talons toward one of the platters to show off one of the dishes. He could still feel the heat emanating from the platter, which wasn't too surprising because he's forgotten about food in this overnight and it was still warm enough to eat.

He hadn't remembered which plate this was either, but it was the only one that had a letter on it so he thought it had to be the best dish. He tried digging through his memory as he was reaching for it, trying to remember the dish they had marked and what it was. That's when Flame smacked his talons out of the way.

"Not so fast, Umber," Flame said. "I made that dish for us later."

"Wha- when did you do that?" Umber questioned.

"I made it while you went to the store for more eggs," Flame laughed.

"We didn't need more eggs, did we?" Umber asked.

"Nope," Flame said. "Not even close."

"Awww," Atlantic interjected to which Avalanche quickly shushed her.

"Okay, then what about this one?" he slowly moved his talons over to one of the other dishes.

"Any of them except the one you just tried to open," Flame said.

Umber then grabbed the handle of the dish and pulled the top off, revealing one of the platters of tender ribs that made Umber's stomach growl at just the sight. Immediately, the smell began to fill the air until all he could smell were the ribs. This had probably been the longest he's gone without eating in at least a year, so he was pretty excited, to say the least.

"Woah!" Endwatcher gasped. "You really can cook!"

"Just something I picked up over the years," Flame explained. "It's nothing much, really."

"That's a little more than just something you picked up over the years," Atlantic said.

"Well, someone has to do it I guess," Flame said. "Anyways, go on! Grab whatever you want! There's chicken, ribs, steak, mashed potatoes, and cooked and...raw salmon." Umber could see the visible disgust on his face when he said that. "Don't worry though, the salmon is still good. I made sure to put some ice in the bowl so that it didn't spoil."

"Raw salmon?" Shrimp interjected. "My favorite!"

"Yeah...delicious," Flame said sarcastically.

Everyone was helping themselves to everything, keeping away from the one dish that Flame had said was theirs. He was suspicious that Avalanche and Shrimp already knew what was inside of it, but he didn't try and ask them because he knew that whatever it was, obviously meant a lot to Flame to keep a secret. He was still excited to see what was inside though because it had to be good if he was going through all this trouble just so that he could keep it a secret instead of just telling him.

Umber grabbed one of the flimsy paper plates and waited until everyone was done grabbing their food so that he could freely spin the tower and look at each dish. He ended up getting ribs, chicken, a few steaks, and a serving of mashed potatoes which took him three plates to fit everything on. He then walked over to his seat and sat down while balancing all three plates in his talons, but

eventually got them lying flat on the table.

"Geez Umber, save some for the rest of us," Flame joked.

"I haven't eaten since lunch," Umber explained. "I'm starving!"

"I think everyone here is probably hungry." Flame stifled a laugh under his breath.

"I think that I'm the only MudWing here," Umber said.

He took his first rib and sucked the meat off the bone. By now, he was used to Flame's cooking so it didn't surprise him that it was good. The meat was tender and juicy, the barbecue sauce was the perfect balance of tangy and sweet, and the meat hardly even stuck to the bone. He finished all of the ribs he had on his plate in just a few minutes.

"You two have really outdone yourselves this time," Avalanche said.

"Just like all the other times we've "outdone ourselves"," Flame said.

"That just means we're improving, Flame!" Umber said. "Maybe one day we could open our own restaurant, just like how you've always wanted to!"

All Flame did was give a quick smirk that he quickly dropped. Umber didn't think much of it, but he found it a little sad that Flame seemed to not be confident enough that they would ever open a restaurant. He knew how happy he'd be if they had opened one, and Umber would be happy as long as he was beside Flame while doing it.

He looked across the table over at Shrimp and watched as he dropped one of the raw fish into his mouth and he couldn't help but gag from watching him. He's only tried raw fish once before, and that's when he was so hungry out in the field and didn't have time to cook it. Marsh had to look after him because he was puking all day after that.

He then began eating the chicken, and he finished the first one in only a few bites. The chicken was also extremely good, but not

surprising. The chicken fell apart like it was a roast, and the seasonings on it were also really good. Everything about anything that Flame cooked always made Umber's stomach growl whether he had just had an entire feast or not. He always thought how lucky he was to be a MudWing that was dating a chef; basically a chef anyways. He wasn't official or anything, but he was definitely good enough to be one.

Then, he moved on to the steaks he had and was most excited about them. Flame had a certain way of cooking them that would always make Umber excited to eat them, and definitely made the steaks taste better than all of his other food. He's watched Flame do this for years and still wonders how he even came up with it.

What he would do is he would take a large pot and fill it up with water. After letting the raw steak warm to room temperature, he would place it in a weird plastic bag and then lay the bag in the water. The water wasn't very hot or anything and that's why he would leave it in it for a few hours. Once it was done, he would very precisely give the steak crust by breathing a little fire on it.

Just as he expected, the first steak was delicious. The meat was tender and the steak was juicy just like everything else. The burnt seasoning on the beef made the taste even better in Umber's opinion. He quickly sucked down the first steak and moved on to the second one, then the third one while using the mashed potatoes as a sort of dipping. By that, everything on his three plates was completely gone and he felt about ready to fall asleep.

"Done already?" Flame said. "That has to be a new record or something MudWing. Do you think you still have any room left? I still have that one last thing I wanted to give you."

Oh no, I completely forgot about that! Umber thought. *As long as it's something I like, I'm sure I'll eat it though.*

"I could probably fit in a few more pounds if I tried," Umber joked.

"Good, because I have a feeling you're gonna love this!" Flame said enthusiastically.

"You're so sweet," Umber said.

He rested his head against Flame's shoulder before he leaned forward and pulled the metal tower of plates toward him, probably so that Umber didn't have to take his head off.

Umber watched as he spun the tower around until the metal plate with an "A" drawn on it was within reach. Slowly, he reached his talons for it and grabbed onto the handle at the top. Umber was excited to see what was underneath it because he had been keeping it such a big secret all day.

He slowly lifted the rounded top, until whatever was under it was completely exposed to the air. At last, he realized that the secret had been an apple pie that looked much like the one Flame made when they first met. The cuts on the top were the same and it looked to be around the same size.

"Is that what I think it is?" Umber asked.

"Yep! It's the first thing I made you! Same recipe and everything!" Flame said. Umber could tell that he was waiting for some sort of reaction, so he gave it to him.

"I love it!" Umber said. "You're missing something though..."

"Wait, what?" Flame panicked. "What'd I forget? I thought I was following everything perfectly! Did I mess it up?"

"Big time," Umber paused, creating a moment of suspense on purpose. "You forgot to call me a gross MudWing this time!"

"You made me think I ruined it for a second." Flame laughed. "So, you want a slice?"

"Of course!" Umber said. "Only a slice though, I'm pretty full from all of the food."

Umber lifted his head off of Flame's shoulder and reached his talons out to grab a plate when Flame took his talons.

"I'll do it. You should probably take a break," Flame said.

Umber knew what he was referring to, and it was that nightmare he had when they both woke up. He knew Flame was concerned, but he wasn't ready to talk about it yet. He also didn't want to be treated like a dragonet, with Flame even getting food for him at this point.

"Flame, I already told you that I'm fine!" Umber said. "It was just a little nightmare is all."

"Yeah, 'course." Flame shot him a glare and Umber realized he wasn't going to say anything in front of everyone, which he was grateful for.

Flame started cutting out a generous slice of the pie with his talons. Umber could see the filling spill out as he lifted it up and plopped it onto a plate, and he was immediately hungry again.

Flame slid the plate over to Umber and then sat back down next to him and he immediately began digging in. The apple pie had brought him back many memories from the past; memories like how Flame wouldn't eat any of the pie, how he gave him one of his graphicolls, and how he even promised to teach him how to read. Then there were also memories of how he tried pushing him away and started reinforcing his walls just as he was starting to bring them down.

Poor Flame, Umber thought. *Stonemover really took a toll on him. At least he's better now.*

"This is great!" Umber said. "It tastes even better than the first time! Are you sure you used the same recipe?"

"Yep, same recipe!" Flame said. "A few things might be slightly off, but that's because I haven't made it in two years."

Umber looked around and could see that everyone was staring at them. He completely forgot that there were others around and that they were watching them do everything they were doing as if they weren't even there and he felt a little embarrassed.

"You two really are meant to be," Atlantic said. "You should see the

look in your eyes whenever Flame looks at you!"

Umber felt himself begin to blush even more when he realized that even a dragonet realized that he was crazy for Flame. His face was turning red and all he wanted to do was change the subject. Flame didn't seem too surprised though, and Umber wasn't surprised that he wasn't. Flame knew how much Umber loved him. He would sit in a cell for the rest of his life if it meant he was saving Flame from that fate.

"That's just what happens when an incredibly handsome MudWing meets an incredibly charming SkyWing," Flame smiled. "Besides, if he wasn't crazy for me he wouldn't have kissed me and ran with his tail between his legs."

"I don't think crazy justifies you two," Simoom commented. "More like disrespectful."

"Simoom, that's enough," Shrimp said. "Why can't you just get along with them? Most of this party wouldn't have been possible without them. They made one mistake and now you won't get off their back about it, so I think the only one being disrespectful is you."

"Whatever." Simoom scoffed.

Umber ignored what Simoom said and finished his slice of pie, licking the plate clean and setting it on top of the pile of all of the other plates of food he had. He guessed that this was probably the most food he had eaten in a while and was definitely the most full he had been in some time.

"Well, I wouldn't be so crazy for you if you weren't so adorable," Umber continued after a few moments of silence.

"Adorable?" Flame said. "Don't call me adorable! That makes me sound like a wuss."

"I mean, you can be sometimes," Umber said.

"Whatever MudWing," Flame said.

Umber looked over and could see the stars in the night sky now.

Each star looked like a white spec in the sky. It looked like someone had flicked their paintbrush against a black background and this was the result. The crickets were in the background, the waves were crashing, and the sand was cold against his talons.

Stargazing was always one of Umber's favorite things to do with Flame. Sometimes, they would set up a blanket and lay in their backyard and stare up at the sky for hours until they ended up falling asleep. They would usually wake up to the sounds of dragonets playing in the street and were even poked awake by one that thought they were dead.

"Who's ready for one more surprise?" Avalanche said.

"Me!" Endwatcher, Atlantic, and Chromis yelled.

"Alright. Flame, Umber, can you go grab those rocks from the pile before and set up the fire?" Avalanche said. "Me and Shrimp are going to go look for sticks to add and you three can play while we're gone."

"A fire?" Chromis said. "Are we roasting marshmallows?"

"No marshmallows," Flame said. "Sorry. I thought that there was already enough sugar in the sauces and spices, especially for a dragonet."

"Awwww," Chromis whined.

"We can tell stories though!" Umber quickly said. "We have to go build it first though, so let's hurry up and do that before it gets too late."

Umber began walking over to the pile of rocks from before. Flame was following close behind him and was gazing up at the stars every time he turned around to check if he was still there. It was pitch black out now. It was like a strange fog that had dropped over them in minutes and Flame had to use his fire to light the way since it was far too cold for Umber to.

In the distance, Umber could see the faint outline of the pile of rocks they made before. There were some small ones, big ones,

sharp ones, and rounded ones but they didn't know which ones would work best so Umber decided he would just take them all and figure it out once they got back.

He could hear Chromis, Atlantic, and Endwatcher playing a game and could see Simoom was lighting up the area with her fire too whenever he turned around to check on him. A part of him was a little scared of the dark, but the other half reminded him that Flame was there to protect him since he couldn't use his fire. Flame has never had to protect him from anyone before; physically, that is. He's had his fair share of mental abuse over the years from different dragons and Flame was usually there to help.

They finally reached the rocks and Umber began picking up as many as he could carry. The air was filled with silence and the sound of the crickets gave him a strange sense of calm.

"Umber, about what happened earlier-" Flame was cut off

"I already told you it was just a nightmare," Umber said. "why won't you just realize that nothing's wrong?"

Why won't you stop asking?! Umber thought. *I don't like lying, but I'm obviously not ready to talk about it!*

"Okay, okay, fine," Flame agreed. "I'm just worried is all."

"There's nothing to be worried about," Umber assured. "It was just a little nightmare is all."

He took as many rocks as he could fit in his wings, on his back, and in his talons and quickly scurried back to the campsite, following Simoom's fire and leaving Flame behind. He felt bad for doing it, but he strangely didn't want to be around him when they were alone right now.

He dropped the rocks down in a pile in front of the table and immediately began building the fire, trying to forget about the image of Crane's corpse lying in a pool of blood in front of him. He was pounding the sharper rocks into the sand with considerable force in a circle, then Flame showed up and dumped his pile of

rocks on his and began helping him. He shot him a worried stare a few times while they were building but Umber tried his best to ignore it.

After a few minutes, they finished building the outer edge and started placing some of the more rounded rocks down around the edges as support. Some of the rocks were sparkly and looked like they had gems hidden in them, but Flame didn't seem to have any interest in looking at them like he usually would, and that concerned Umber.

I'm sorry Flame, but I need to keep this to myself for now, Umber thought.

Just as they finished putting down the rounded rocks, Umber heard something that sounded like a pile of sticks dropped next to him which made him jump and let out a little yelp. It didn't help that he was already on edge from being in the dark either. He looked over and could see the red outline of Avalanche who had dropped her pile of sticks next to him and felt a little embarrassed.

"Don't scare me like that!" Umber reflexively yelled.

"What's got you all jumpy?" Avalanche said.

"I- uhm...I'm-" Umber tried to say.

"You're scared of the dark, aren't you?" Simoom interjected. She was only standing a few meters away, so eavesdropping was a given.

"...Maybe?" Umber said.

"That's hilarious!" Simoom laughed hysterically. "A dragon that's killed other dragons is scared of the dark!"

"It's not like I wanted to kill them!" Umber snapped. "Besides, I wouldn't be here today if I didn't..." he trailed off.

The image of Crane flashed in his mind again, but he quickly batted that thought to the side because Flame already seemed suspicious about what had put him on edge when he woke up.

"Okay, let's change the subject," Avalanche interrupted. "Let's get this fire going so we can all see two feet in front of us."

She picked up a talonful of sticks and threw them in the pit. Shrimp had also thrown all of his there and Umber only realized he was there once he did that since he was obscured in the dark.

Once all of the sticks were in the pit, Avalanche blew a plume of fire that immediately made the pile of sticks go up in flames. The sudden warmth of the fire made Umber fall backward and it felt like he was still in the kitchen with the oven on and the fresh smell of perfectly cooked food in the air.

Chromis, Atlantic, and Endwatcher immediately raced over to the fire once they realized that the fire was up and Simoom stopped lighting up the area with her fire.

"Yes! Finally!" Chromis said. "It's so cold out here! Can we tell stories now?"

"I know I said that this was the last surprise, but I have one more for Flame and Umber," Avalanche said.

"Wha- for us?" Umber asked in a confused tone.

"Well it's more like a surprise for Flame, but you both get to experience it!" Avalanche said. "Besides, you already have one of these."

"One of what-" he trailed off as Avalanche pulled something from her wing.

She pulled out a necklace that had the same silver chain that Umber's had, and it had a red gem that shined bright as it reflected the light off of the fire. It sparkled like all of the stars in the sky combined, letting off a yellow shine from the fire and Umber couldn't help but adore how beautiful it was. He thought that it was even more beautiful than the one he had, and that got him a bit jealous. That didn't stop the excitement he was feeling at the fact that they would have matching necklaces.

"That's...for me?" Flame said. His expression looked amazed and

surprised at the same time. "It's so beautiful! Me and Umber could never afford..." he trailed off. "how much did you spend on that? It better not have been a lot, because then I'll feel like I have to pay you back!"

"It...wasn't much," she paused. "It only cost...maybe two of the towers of food you brought?"

"I- I can't take that!" Flame said. "Return it or something! I can't wear something that expensive!"

"Too late," Avalanche said. "the place has a no refund policy."

"Sell it then!" Flame pleaded. "I can't take that knowing how much it-"

"Flame, just take it," Shrimp said. "we both worked hard to get it, just like you worked hard to set most of this party up."

"Fine! If it will make you happy, then I'll put it on," Flame said. "But don't think that I'm not paying you back for this in some way."

Umber watched as Flame tried to put the necklace on, but ended up getting the chain caught on his horns just like he had. Then, he grabbed the chain and quickly untangled it from his horns, and put it around his neck, pretending as if nothing had even happened. To Umber that meant that he was obviously embarrassed about it, so he didn't say anything.

"It feels weird," Flame said. "It's really heavy around my neck like this."

"You get used to it," Umber said. "Sometimes I can't even tell that I have it on and have to check if it's there."

Flame came over and sat down next to him by the campfire and kept their scales close.

"Who's up for a story then?" Simoom interrupted. "I have a really good one I'm sure Chromis would like to hear."

"A story? What's it about?" Chromis asked impatiently.

"It's about a young dragonet that looked much like you, and one of his wild adventures in the rainforest."

"That's so cool!" Chromis said. "Can you tell it?"

"I'd love to!" Simoom said with a smile. "Once upon a time, a young dragonet who lived in the rainforest..."

Umber listened to the story with his head in his talons and could feel sleep slowly taking him back. The couple hours of sleep he had gotten earlier definitely wasn't enough and it didn't help that he had just eaten an entire buffet of food. He desperately tried to stay awake to listen to the story Simoom was telling, but sleep took him by surprise and he ended up passing out on Flame's shoulder.

"Umber... Umber! UMBER!" Flame yelled, nudging his shoulder.

"What?" he said drowsily. "I was sleep- how long was I asleep?"

"That's what I was waking you up for," Flame said. "Party's over."

"Awww I missed the story!" Umber complained.

He looked around and could see that they were the only ones around and the fire was just about out. Flame was holding the metal tower of plates in his talons, so he assumed that he was ready to leave.

"Don't worry, it wasn't that good so you didn't miss out on much," Flame said. "so how about we go home now and get some well-deserved rest?"

"Sounds good," Umber said. "I'm still a little mad I fell asleep though, even if I can get some real sleep now."

"You were only asleep for thirty minutes," Flame said. "Really, the story was kind of boring. I thought about joining you a few times."

"Was it really that bad?" Umber questioned.

"It wasn't the best story I've heard. I can tell you all about it tomorrow," Flame said.

"Yeah, I think I'm good if it was really that boring," Umber admitted.

"Alright then, let's go home." Flame gave him a peck on the cheek.

They both took off, slowly flying away from the beach and in the direction of the Sky Kingdom. Umber's sense of direction was pretty off after falling asleep, so he relied on the sound of Flame's wingbeats. All he could think about on the flight home was how excited he was to finally be able to go to sleep, and how boring it was to fly without being able to look down at the ground and admire the scenery.

They finally landed on their street and Umber rushed through the door and into their room. He bumped into a few things on the way, but Flame lit a candle as soon as he got in the door so he could see again. He lay in bed for a few minutes while waiting for Flame to put down the food. He wasn't fully sleepy yet though; the flight had woken him up a bit.

After a few minutes, he saw the candle go out and could hear Flame creep his way through their bedroom door, closing it once he was inside and lying down next to Umber. He could feel one of Flame's wings cover him, but he was already half asleep and hardly even noticed.

"Goodnight, Umber," Flame said softly right before Umber was swept away into sleep.

Author's note: Finally decided I'd go out of my way to upload to Wattpad and AO3. Some of you may be reading this on them, so hello new people! Also, I finally made a cover haha. I think it really spices the story up a lot and it may or may not have been inspired by my pfp.

Chapter 8

Another trigger warning for blood in this chapter. Also, one side note before this chapter should be that I made up a currency called "suns". One sun is equal to about $2 USD for reference (since most of my viewers are from the U.S.). Each coin is one sun and there are also half-suns and quarter-suns that are just smaller coins.

Umber's POV

"Und...Under...Understood," Umber read. "I will try to get the as...assignment completed on time," he struggled.

He looked out of the window and could see that the sun was high in the sky. They had been reading for an hour at this point and Umber was getting pretty exhausted from struggling with so many words. Flame had just gone out and bought a new series of scrolls since they had read every scroll from before multiple times, so Umber couldn't remember what word was coming up and try to say it from memory. The new scrolls had slightly bigger letters and he could definitely tell that these didn't use complicated words, especially ones he struggled with.

"I should get going," Umber realized. "It's noon and I still have to go out and check a few things just to make sure that they're ready for tomorrow."

"Just one more? Please?" Flame begged. "You're getting so much better!"

"We can read later," Umber said. "Our anniversary is tomorrow and I still have a few things to check."

Thank the moon's Avalanche said she would try and get me a spot in one of her friend's restaurants! Umber thought. His body was filled with happiness and anxiety at the same time. *I don't know if I would have found a place in time!*

A couple days earlier

Flame and Umber decided that they would go over to Avalanche's house to visit. Even though they had just planned and celebrated a whole hatching party a few days ago with her, Flame still found himself missing her and urged Umber to take a little while off of planning to visit. Since it wasn't going to be long, Umber agreed even though their anniversary was in a few days and he still didn't have a restaurant for them to eat at and he was beginning to get stressed out about it.

It had taken them an hour to get to Possibility, and it would take them an hour to get back so Umber wasn't exactly excited to visit someone for the first time in his life.

"We better make this quick," Umber said while knocking on the door. "I've still got a lot to do."

"You didn't even have to come, you know," Flame reminded.

"Well you're the one who begged me to come along," Umber recalled.

"Don't worry, I'll make sure to *make it up to you* once we get home." He winked.

The door swung open and Umber could see Avalanche standing there looking pretty annoyed. He guessed that it might have been Chromis giving her a hard time since he did that a lot. A few times when they were over, they had to convince Chromis to listen to Avalanche whether that be by bribing him with ice cream; or playing some sort of game that tricked him into doing what she asked.

"I already told you that I don't want your- oh, hey you two!" Avalanche said. "I've just been being bugged all morning by these stupid salesdragons that won't go away no matter how many times I tell them I don't want what they're selling. Anyways, come in!"

Umber looked past her and could see Chromis was on the couch reading a scroll with Shrimp. They weren't underwater reading it

like Shrimp promised they would do though. As he listened, he heard Chromis get stuck on a few words that he had already learned and was relieved that a one-year-old dragonet couldn't read better than him.

As he walked in, he stepped on a brown mat that matched the floor that said "WELCOME" on it. This wasn't here last time, so Umber assumed that they had just bought it. The mat wasn't dirty or anything either so that only added to the idea of it being new.

He wiped his paws against the rug as his eyes adjusted to the dim light. There were only a few windows and candles lighting the small room. The air was cooler in here and he felt instantly relieved as the air cooled his scales down; it was considerably hot outside today. That was one of the reasons Umber didn't want to spend hours flying to Possibility and back for a dragon he was talking to all day the other day.

"It feels so much nicer in here than outside," Umber commented.

"Hot day today, huh?" Avalanche asked. "I haven't gone outside yet. I was planning on coming over today to talk to you about something, but you're here already so I guess that saves me the trouble of flying."

Umber shot his death stare at Flame who immediately backed up a few steps and was giving him his "sorry" eyes.

We came all the way out here for nothing! Umber thought. *She was already going to come over and we wasted time coming out here! Now planning this is going to be cut even closer!*

He was pretty annoyed at this, especially with all of the stress of their anniversary weighing him down; he was also curious about what Avalanche wanted to talk to him about though so he didn't say anything about it.

What does she want to talk to me about though? It must be important if she was willing to fly two hours from Possibility to the Sky Kingdom to say, Umber thought.

"What do you need to talk to him about?" Flame asked curiously.

"*That* is none of your concern," Avalanche said. "Umber, how about we go outside and talk about it? Flame can't be around for what I'm about to tell you."

"Why can't I hear it?!" Flame interjected. "What are you two talking about that I can't hear about?" Umber noticed the look on his face and could tell that he was getting angry.

"Uh- yeah," Umber said. "what is it you need to talk to me about?"

"It's anniversary stuff," Avalanche said. "now go read with Chromis or something Flame."

"Fine," Flame agreed. "but you better not be saying anything about me!"

Avalanche grabbed Umber's talons and dragged him outside and down the street a little so that Flame couldn't eavesdrop on them. Umber picked up on this and looked behind him every couple of seconds so that he could make sure that Flame wasn't creeping behind them or anything.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" Umber asked. "It must be important if you were going to fly from Possibility and back."

"Well, I was going to ask you..." she stopped for a few seconds and took a few glances behind her. "if you would like a free reservation at one of my old Talons of Peace friend's restaurants," she whispered.

"R-Really? Umber was conflicted with shock and excitement and could barely formulate a sentence. "You would do that?"

"Of course!" Avalanche said. "We were close and bumped into each other while we were out shopping at the Sky Kingdom. One thing led to another, and he asked if you would want a free reservation."

"This is perfect!" Umber said. "Why didn't you say anything sooner?"

"Well, it wasn't one hundred percent yet, so I wanted to wait until I

had to go ahead to tell you. I got a letter about it last night," she said.

"Thank you so much!" Umber leaned in for a hug which Avalanche awkwardly accepted. "I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to find a place in time because everything was either fully booked, too expensive, or didn't have any good food."

"Oh, I forgot to mention that everything's free up to a hundred suns," Avalanche said.

"A HUNDRED?!" Umber exclaimed. "You have to tell him how grateful I am! I mean, this is perfect! Flame will be able to get whatever he wants!"

"Oh don't worry, I'll tell him every detail of your freakout about it," she laughed. "Just make sure to check in on your reservation every day though. The place is called "Where Ends Meat" and it should be near the outskirts of your town."

I never checked the outskirts, Umber thought. *I didn't think anyone would build a restaurant there.*

Present

"Fine." Flame said. "We're reading extra tomorrow night though!"

"We'll see," Umber said as he left through the door. "I'll be back later!"

He closed the door behind him and looked up at the evening sky. He had checked that restaurant a few times before to see if his reservation was in, but it hadn't been yet and he was starting to get a little nervous about it since their anniversary was tomorrow and he had nothing else planned except a couple of spots for them to lay in the grass and stargaze after dinner.

What if something happened? What if he forgot about the reservation? What if there was a mix-up and the reservation wasn't put on the list? he worried as he lifted off into the air.

As he flew over to the restaurant, he couldn't help but constantly try

and think about what he would do if the reservation didn't work out, but he couldn't come up with anything, and that only brought up his anxiety about the whole situation. As much as he trusted Avalanche, he had no idea who her Talons of Peace friend was.

What if he is just like that SkyWing and doesn't like the fact that I'm dating Flame? What if...what if he was the SkyWing from before? he thought.

This did seem a little far-fetched to him though, so he didn't think of that possibility too much. He tried reassuring himself by telling himself that it was just his imagination getting the better of him, but he still couldn't stop thinking of the million different ways this could backfire on him.

At last, he was reaching the edge of the town and could see the restaurant in the distance. He could see a different dragon at the door today, which he thought was odd because all of the other times he's come over to the restaurant there was the same SandWing checking reservations. This time, a NightWing was standing there with a clipboard in his talons which Umber presumed to be a list of everyone with a reservation.

Oh, thank the moon's it's someone different, Umber thought. *I think that SandWing was getting annoyed with me for constantly checking for a reservation that might not even exist.*

He thumped down on the path in one of the spots that didn't have dragons walking everywhere and began toward the restaurant. The building had a big red sign on it that read "Where Ends Meat" in fancy letters that Umber could barely read.

Once he was finally at the door, the NightWing stared him in the eyes and was looking around him to see if there were any other dragons following him. He felt a little embarrassed going to a fancy restaurant like this alone but he was only checking for a reservation so the embarrassment was short-lived.

"Reservation?" the NightWing said.

"Is there any reservation for Umber tomorrow night?" Umber asked.

He watched as the NightWing took his talon and started scrolling through the list. After a few seconds of this, he began getting nervous that he still hadn't been on the reservation and that he would have to make up completely new plans in the span of a few hours. He felt a jolt of relief though when the NightWing stopped his talon somewhere near the middle of the list.

"Oh! Yes, I completely forgot," he said. "Maelstrom has put in a special request for you tomorrow night."

A SeaWing owner? Umber thought. *Haven't seen many of those around. At least it isn't that SkyWing though.*

"Thank the moons!" Umber said. "I only found out a couple of days ago about this reservation. It's cut really short now and I've been planning this anniversary for weeks now!"

"Anniversary? Who's the lucky lady?" he said.

"Uhm- well it's not a lady," Umber laughed nervously. "It's more of a handsome-"

"I THOUGHT I TOLD YOU TO NOT COME BACK HERE!" a voice behind him interrupted.

Umber quickly swung around as fast as he could, almost knocking the clipboard out of the NightWings talons with his tail. Standing there was the SkyWing from a little under two weeks ago. He was staring Umber up and down, pinning him down with just his glare. It felt like his gaze was completely paralyzing Umber from the neck down and his scales were as heavy as gold. His heart was racing and all he wanted to do was run away and hide until the sunset, but something about him was keeping him from running away. It was almost as if he had cast a spell to keep him from running and hiding and was forced to stand there and take anything he said. He was much bigger than Umber and could probably snap his neck in one swift motion if he wanted.

"Nobody wants you or your boyfriend here! Don't you see that?! Why are you so hellbent on coming back?!" he continued. He began glaring Umber up and down and his face lit up when he saw

something. "That necklace looks nice. Give it to me. A dragon like you doesn't deserve something as nice as that and I could probably sell it for a lot of money to someone who deserves it anyways."

My necklace? I can't give it to him though... Flame just got his necklace and now mine is about to be taken? Umber thought. *No. I'm not letting this SkyWing bully me into giving him my necklace. I can't.*

"I think you should leave," the NightWing said. "before I get security to make you leave."

"As if I give a shit about your *security*," the SkyWing said. "This disgusting MudWing is the one who should be forced to leave! Now give me the necklace before I make you give it to me!"

"N-No," Umber stuttered out. His voice was shaky and he wanted to run now more than ever. "I'm not giving you anything!"

"Did you just talk back to me?" the SkyWing said.

Umber could see the anger all over his face at this point. His eyes were fiery and all he looked like he wanted to do was claw him for even daring to say anything back instead of just giving him the necklace and leaving, but Umber didn't think he'd do anything; except he did.

Without hesitation, the SkyWing raised his talon and slapped Umber across the right side of his face, leaving a long scratch along his cheek and sent him stumbling into the NightWing who caught him before he could fall. He was too shocked to say anything and didn't even notice that there was already blood dripping down his face and onto the ground. He knew what was going to happen the moment he saw his talon raise though and was about to dodge it, but an image of Icicle popped into his head as she lunged at him and that made him freeze up as if he was being frozen by her ice breath herself.

After a few seconds, he recovered and could feel the pain of the scratch now. He noticed that there was already blood trickling down his face and dripping onto the gravel path. He quickly took his talons and covered the scratch to prevent any more blood from

dripping.

He could feel the blood soak his talons as they met his face, so he took a quick look at them and could see that there was blood all over them, soaking his paw. Part of him was in pain and the other part was in complete shock and disbelief at what had just happened and all he could think to do was to stand there and let the rest play out by itself.

"SECURITY!" the NightWing yelled.

Another SkyWing that was a little bigger than Umber quickly ran over and split the two up. The SkyWing looked to have a scar over his right eye, but Umber could hardly see it because of the black eyepatch he had covering it. Other than that, he looked like every other SkyWing in this town. He just had a necklace, an earring, a small pouch on his front right leg, and a wristband that had many different colored gems in it. Despite all of this though, something about him gave Umber the impression that he must be important in some way.

"O-Oh my! A-Are you okay?" the helpful SkyWing stuttered out. "L-Let me get you s-something for that." He pulled out a large roll of some sort of sticky bandage, ripped a piece off, and put it on his face.

"I'll be fine," Umber said. "I've had worse."

Immediately, the blood started soaking into the bandage and the helpful SkyWing started ripping a few more bandages off of the roll and sticking them on his face so that the blood didn't soak through the bandages. After a few more being stuck to his cheek, the bleeding seemed to stop for the time being. But the aggressive SkyWing from before was still standing there with a smirk on his face, looking like he was proud of what he had just done.

What is wrong with him?! Umber thought. *He needs help!*

Finally, a couple of rather large SandWings showed up and grabbed his shoulders while keeping their tail barbs raised in case he tried anything.

"LET GO OF ME!" the SkyWing screamed.

"T-Take him to the Queen if possible," he said. "Tell her that Turvar s-sent him."

Turvar, huh? Umber thought. *What connection does he have to Queen Ruby?*

"We don't listen to anyone but Maelstrom, *Turvar*," one of the SandWings said. "We have this under control, so how about you go home?"

"T-That's Prince Turvar to you," Turvar said. "Now, t-take him to Queen Ruby." The SandWing shot him a growl and continued walking. He was definitely not happy about that.

Prince Turvar? Umber thought. *When did he become a prince and how? I've never heard of him before. He's so nervous for a prince. Shouldn't he not be scared of anyone?*

"Prince?" Umber questioned. "No disrespect, but I've never heard of you before and I've read all about the princes and princesses." He put his talons up to his cheek to stop some of the pain.

"No s-surprise there, ha," Turvar said. "Ruby adopted me fairly r-recently actually. My m-mother threw me out once I t-turned seven because of my eye." He scratched his neck nervously.

"Oh," Umber said sympathetically. "I'm so sorry. What happened to your eye if you don't mind me asking?"

"Natural b-born defect," Turvar said. "I don't r-really like talking to other d-dragons, but what did you do to piss him o-off?"

"I- uhm, I'm sort of...dating another male" he paused. "and he doesn't like that idea too much. I ran into him a couple of weeks ago and I said too much, and now he's seen me again."

"I don't s-see a problem with t-that," Turvar said. "As long a-as you're happy, I think it's f-fine."

"Me and Flame- uh- my boyfriend are happy together. He's had a

violent past but he's changed a lot. I don't know how he'll respond to this though." Umber said.

"I'll make s-sure he gets what h-he deserves, don't worry," Turvar said.

"Thank you," Umber said. "I really don't know what I would've done without you."

"I-It's no problem," Turvar said. "Just g-get home safe."

Umber bowed his head down in appreciation and then began walking away. He could still feel the pain on his cheek and his heart was still racing and his talons were still shaky as ever. All he wanted to do was go home for today and lay down next to Flame and fall asleep on his shoulder.

There was one problem with this though; Flame was going to see the scratch on his face and no doubt go crazy over it.

Flame, please just leave this be, Umber thought. He knew he wouldn't, but all he could do was hope at this point. Flame was far too protective of Umber and he knew it.

He took off into the air, leaving Turvar and the restaurant behind. He spotted the SandWings from before escorting the SkyWing to the palace. They couldn't fly with him because they had no restraints and they kept their tail barbs pointing at him as they walked, being careful to keep them away from any other SkyWings that they might run into.

As he flew, he tried distracting himself from what had just happened by looking around at the different plants, birds, and any other wildlife he could see and tried to admire them or guess what kind of plant it was. He flew low to the ground so he could see the plants, but they were still almost impossible for him to make out. So he moved on to the birds but he already knew every single bird species there was in the area. Nothing could distract him from having to face Flame; not even the calming wind that would blow in his face and around his wings could get it off of his mind.

After a few minutes, he spotted their house. Strangely, no dragonets were playing outside right now like there usually were. He was a little disappointed that he didn't have their roars and laughs to calm him and distract him but was also a little grateful. If they saw his scratch then they would no doubt ask him questions and hold him up. Maybe even Flame would notice what was happening and yell at them because of how angry he'd be about the scratch.

He thumped down on the gravel path in front of their house, his heart beating so fast that he was sure it would explode any second now. He slowly crept toward the doorway, stalling as he tried to find any excuse for him to go back to the town; but there was no excuse, there was nothing he could do to turn back now because the anniversary was already set up and ready for tomorrow. The only thing he had to do now was walk in the door and listen to Flame get angry and try his best to calm him.

He reached his talons toward the door handle and turned it with a little push and felt the cool air hit his scales from inside their house. The table was cleaned off from any graphicolls from earlier but there was no sight of Flame. Umber assumed that he was in another room so he took a couple more steps in, closing the door behind him with a thud. Once he was inside, he could smell the strong smell of eggs in the air and immediately knew where Flame was.

"Umber? Is that you?" Flame said from the kitchen. "You're back early." He walked into the living room. "I just made some eggs, do you want some-" he paused "What happened to your face?!"

Flame's POV

Umber had just left only a few minutes ago and Flame was cleaning the graphicolls off of the table and putting them in the box. They were running out of space in the box and Flame had been thinking of giving the graphicolls he's already read to Chromis. Sure, he would be a little sad to see most of his collection go if he decided to, but seeing the happiness in Chromis's eyes would be worth it in the end.

I'm getting hungry, Flame thought. *Hopefully Umber won't mind if I make something to eat.*

He slid the box under the table and made his way over to the kitchen and began washing his talons in the sink. As he looked out of the window above the sink, he didn't see any dragonets playing outside like usual which he thought was odd since there weren't many days when there weren't dragonets playing outside.

He began thinking of what to make and ultimately decided to make something quick and simple; eggs.

He turned the faucet off and started drying his talons. Once he was satisfied with the dryness of them, he walked over to the fridge and grabbed the eggs, milk, and butter which were all either on the top shelf or the one below it. He went over to the cupboard and grabbed a fork, bowl, plate, pan, and spatula. He cracked a few eggs into the bowl and began whisking them, adding a little milk every few seconds.

I really hope Umber knows what he's doing, Flame thought. *I don't want this to be a disaster, for his sake.*

Flame was nervous for Umber whenever he wasn't in sight for him to protect him, more than ever since that SkyWing a couple weeks ago. He knew he needed to stop being so protective though, but he didn't know where to start. As much as he trusted Umber to be able to handle himself he still had a sinking feeling of worry that he was out on the paths, alone, with nobody to protect him.

He was also worried about him ever since that dream he had. He's tried asking him about what happened multiple times since then, but he still wouldn't budge and insisted that nothing was wrong. He just wished that Umber would trust him as much as he trusted Umber, but he didn't blame him since he rarely had to talk to Flame about his emotions so there weren't many chances to build that trust anyways.

Umber, why won't you just tell me what's wrong? Flame thought. *We can work through this together! Something must have happened during that war, I just know it.*

There was also the fact that he was stressed; Flame knew it by the way he would always avoid talking about their anniversary. He

would try to play it off as him keeping it a secret, but Flame knew that wasn't the case. There was so much going on with Umber and Flame felt bad about it but there was nothing he could do if he wouldn't tell him.

Once the eggs were fully mixed he set the bowl down and lit the stove and scooped out a little butter from the butter container, threw it in the pan, and lit the stove.

He watched as the butter melted, then threw in the eggs and began stirring. After a few seconds, the pan heated up enough, and began cooking the eggs as he was mixing them around to avoid them burning all while he was chopping them up at the same time.

After a few minutes of this, the eggs were fully cooked. He picked up the pan and brought it over to the counter and dumped the eggs on the plate, making sure to scoop out every little bit.

Flame didn't like his eggs with an overpowering spice flavor, so he just kept it simple with salt and pepper.

Just as he was finished putting everything away, he heard the door creak open.

Umber? he thought. *Why's he back so early?*

Umber? Is that you?" Flame called out. "You're back early." He began walking out into the living room. "I just made some eggs, do you want some-"

He immediately stopped what he was saying as he looked at Umber's face. There were bloody bandages wrapped on his upper cheek and he could see dried blood on his scales and talons. He took a second to recognize that his injuries were even real.

"What happened to your face?!" he yelled.

"I- uhm...I fell and scratched it on the corner of a table," Umber said.

"Umber, don't fuck with me right now," Flame said seriously. "Who did this to you?!"

All he could feel right now was anger and he felt about ready to beat the dragon who did this to death. He clenched his talons against the floor and completely forgot about how hungry he was. This is exactly what he was worried about; a situation like this.

"It's nothing Flame," Umber said softly as he walked towards him, putting his talons on his shoulder. "How about you just calm down and we can go read some graphi-"

"NO!" Flame screamed, batting Umber's talons away. "Tell me who the fuck did this to you so I can go down there and beat the shit out of them!"

"Wait! No! He's already been taken care of!" Umber admittedly yelled. "He's probably already being talked to by Queen Ruby right now!"

"So he's at the palace then. Got it." He shoved past Umber who was intentionally blocking the door and reached for the door handle.

"Flame! Stop!" Umber grabbed his talons. "Please stay here! You're going to get in trouble!"

"I don't give a shit Umber!" Flame yelled. "He hurt you, now let go so I can teach him a lesson!"

"He's already going to get punished! Please stop! I can't lose you over something so pointless!" he cried.

As Flame looked back, he could see the worry and tears trickling down Umber's face and dripping on the floor. He noticed that his cut had started bleeding again and could see the blood soaking even more of the bandage with a bright red spot, probably from yelling again and opening it back up. His body immediately went from tensed up and angry to relaxed and worried. The moment of realization that he had lost control again hit him like a barrel full of watermelons that had their stands kicked out and he lowered his arm and came out of the rage-driven rampage he was going through.

FUCK! he screamed in his head.

"I...I'm sorry," Flame said. "I lost control again, didn't I?"

"Just a bit." Umber let go of his talons. "Can we please just stop this now? We can go and buy a proper bandage if you want and just forget about this whole thing." He wiped the tears off of his scales.

"Y-Yeah," Flame said. "I just...I can't stand seeing you hurt like this. I mean, I let you go out there. This is my fault."

"Flame, I'm the one who offered to go out there!" Umber said. "I wanted to set up our anniversary, so don't beat yourself up over this. Besides, it's better me than you because if that dragon had done this to you, I don't think he'd be alive to tell the tale." He forced a laugh.

"Maybe..." Flame said. "L-Let's just go out and buy a bandage now. I need to clear my head."

"And once we get home we can read some graphicolls, alright?" Umber said. Flame just gave a little nod to this.

"I-I'm going back to my old ways...aren't I?" Flame said after a long pause

"Flame, I don't blame you for freaking out," Umber said. "but we can forget about this now because you stopped and didn't follow through with it."

"Please just...promise to stop me if I ever do that again," Flame said.

"I promise," Umber said. "Let's go now before the bandage soaks up too much blood." He grabbed Flame's talons and opened the door and led him out.

The air outside was warm and was a nice change of scenery for him since he had been stuck in the house all day. They had just been hanging around and reading mostly, so Flame hadn't gotten the chance to go outside yet. It was nice out and he started regretting not coming out earlier, especially since winter was coming soon and nice days like this would be about as scarce as Flame remembering to bathe without Umber reminding him.

They took off in the air with Flame quickly slowing down and gliding every couple of seconds to keep up with Umber but keeping a few meters ahead of him so that he didn't have to look at his face because he didn't want to see the disappointment spread across it. He was sure that at this moment, Umber must have been more disappointed than he ever had been with him before, and he was ashamed.

He looked down at the dragons, the houses, shops, and different animals as he zoned out while thinking of what him freaking out meant and what this changes about their relationship. Flame thought he had figured himself out when he officially started dating Umber, but it turns out that he just delayed another rampage. He was so lost in thought about this that he hardly even noticed that Umber wasn't behind him anymore and was gliding down to the markets without him, so he quickly turned to a dive and began following him.

He landed down on the path with a thump, sending gravel through the air not far behind Umber. They landed in front of a pharmaceutical store that had a big, red plus on the front of it and said "Med Center" above it. They had been here multiple times and that was usually to get some ointment or rubbing alcohol for burns whenever they were cooking. Flame rarely burnt himself but when he did, it was always bad and extremely painful.

He followed Umber into the store with his head down and meandered behind him through the multiple isles as he skimmed his talons against many different large bandages. Some were already dipped in rubbing alcohol, some weren't, and some were way too small for Umber's cut. He ultimately picked out one that was the perfect size and was already alcohol dipped and began walking toward the counter when he saw Flame staring at the ground.

"Flame?" Umber grabbed his attention. "Are you okay?"

"I-I just can't believe I went on another rampage like that," Flame said. "I thought I changed, but obviously I didn't. I'm so sorry Umber. I just keep screwing up so much."

"You were only protecting me Flame." Umber put his talon on his shoulder. "Don't beat yourself up over this. We all make mistakes and learn from them. So please, don't get so angry at yourself."

Hearing these words come from Umber meant the world to him. Hearing this confirmed to Flame that Umber wasn't disappointed or mad at him, but just wanted to help him. He thought carefully about his words for a few more seconds before realizing that he did need to stop being so hard on himself. Every time he does something wrong, he would get angry at himself for a few days. It has been especially happening often too.

He's right, Flame thought. *I need to learn to forgive myself.*

"You're right," Flame said. "I really do need to stop.

"Wha- really?" Umber's tone was a mix of confusion and happiness. "You're...actually going to? I didn't expect you to agree so easily."

"Well, you did have a point," Flame said. "I'm always getting angry at myself for the tiniest things and I need to stop."

"So does this mean we're good now?" Umber questioned.

"Yeah...I guess it does," Flame said.

"Good. I'm a bit tired though so can we just cuddle when we get home instead of reading?" Umber asked.

"Yeah, sure," Flame said. "Whatever you want. You've had a rough day."

They both brought the bandage up to the counter and paid for it and the price ended up being a half-sun. Once they were outside, Flame took the bandage and slowly took the bloody bandage off of Umber's face, being careful not to touch the wound. Then, he took the bandage and slowly stuck it to his cheek, and discarded the packaging. The scratch hadn't been bleeding anymore either which was good because the blood would ruin the new one in an instant.

On the flight home, Flame began thinking about why a dragon would've wanted to do that to Umber. He thought that it couldn't

have been something random and they had to have had a past encounter before, so he started there. He thought back through all of the things that have happened in the last few weeks, then it clicked.

THAT SKYWING! he realized. *Does us being together piss you off that much?! What the hell is wrong with some dragons? He better get what's coming to him!*

Once they could see their house in the distance and Flame could see dragonets playing outside now. Their screams and laughs filled the air as they got closer and all he could think about was how he wished that they were never oppressed like Umber was today. In love with the same gender or not, a dragon like Umber doesn't deserve to be treated the way he was.

They finally landed on the path in front of their house and went inside. Immediately, Flame could smell the aroma of the eggs he had made before still sitting on a plate in the kitchen; they were most definitely cold now and he could already feel his stomach rumbling again once he realized.

"Gah! I forgot about the eggs I made," Flame realized.

"We can make more if you want," Umber said.

"Nah, it's fine. I'll just make something else later." Flame walked over to the couch and sat down with his wing open. "You coming?"

"Oh, yeah." Umber walked over to the other side of the couch and sat down next to Flame, hugging him close.

As their scales met, the usual calm feeling came over Flame and he tightened his wing around Umber and rested his head against his shoulder. He closed his eyes and began gently caressing his talons against his back. His thoughts started going blank and all he could think about was Umber's warmth.

Soon enough, he could feel his eyelids getting heavier and heavier by the second as his talons gradually moved and slower until they came to a complete stop and his body went limp as sleep pulled him

in like the smell of perfect food would in the markets whenever he was too lazy to make anything.

Author's note: Another early upload haha. I actually finished the chapter Tuesday and couldn't wait any longer (don't ask me how I did it so fast). Also, massive thanks to Jewels Nightcap for letting me use his OC, Prince Turvar, in this chapter haha. He's pretty fun to write since I can relate to him so much in real life lol. I have a few ideas for him in the future that I'm really excited to write. I'll be taking a couple more OC requests for this, so dm me on discord at Amisgal#8679 if you want me to add yours!

Chapter 9

Little Wattpad exclusive note, I didn't know that the POV lines didn't actually transfer over haha. They were in the editor for each chapter so I assumed that they showed up while reading it. That's all fixed now though and must have been extremely confusing.

Umber's POV

Umber opened his eyes to the bright, morning light. His scales were warm against Flame's as they touched and their tails were wrapped around each other. They weren't intertwined exactly, even though that's how he remembered them falling asleep, but one was on top of the other. As feeling finally came through his body, a moment of Flame losing it flashed through his head. He thought that he had done a pretty decent job of calming him down, or it was the fact that Flame saw his tears from the fear of losing him over something so pointless. He didn't care though as long as he calmed him down and diverted him away from doing something so pointless.

After Flame had woken up from Umber's shoulder last night, Flame had gone and made himself something else to eat while Umber ran how he wanted the anniversary to go through his head a few times, picking and choosing the places he wanted to bring Flame before they went and ate. He ultimately decided on this beautiful mountaintop that had a perfect view of a lot of the Sky Kingdom in all of its glory. You could see the many different dragons walking the path, the red, brown, and beige houses lining the streets, and the center of the town where all of the markets were bustling with activity as dragons ate and shopped.

As he tried to sit up, he was quickly pushed back down by something. He took under the blanket and could clearly see Flame's bright red wing covering him. He had been doing this a lot more recently and Umber assumed it was either because of their anniversary coming up, or he wanted to keep Umber close because he was going out alone more often.

"Flame, wake up." Umber tapped Flame on his shoulder. "You have your wing around me again."

"What'd you say?" Flame said drowsily. He took a couple of seconds to look around before realizing what was happening. "Oh, sorry." He tucked his wing back in.

Umber finally sat up and looked around the room. The morning light was shining through the windows, reflecting off of his and Flame's necklaces. He was grateful that Avalanche had given it to Flame as a gift so that they could match. It wasn't much compared to many other dragons in the Sky Kingdom, but that's not what he cared about; he cared that there were dragons out there that were kind enough to give the expensive jewelry to them.

Then a jolt of excitement hit him when he realized what today was; it was their anniversary. One year ago today, Umber had agreed to take the next step in their relationship and officially start dating Flame. He looked over at Flame and by the massive smile and glint in his eyes, he had this sudden realization too.

After a few seconds of staring, he leaped up and gave Umber a great big bear hug, pinning his arms to the sides of his body as Flame's arms and wings wrapped their full length around Umber.

"You're...kind of squishing me," Umber said.

"Oops," Flame said as he furdled his wings back in and released his grip from Umber. "It's our anniversary though!"

"I know!" Umber said excitedly. "I just...don't want to mess this up."

"Oh, calm down MudWing," Flame said. "I'm sure it'll be fine." He shot Umber a smile that instantly swept all of his worries away as if they were being dragged down a river and Umber gave him a light smile back. "I'll make us some breakfast, alright?"

Hearing the word "breakfast" instantly made Umber's stomach growl. As much as he didn't like Flame making him breakfast in the morning, he hadn't eaten anything last night because he was too focused on keeping Flame calm.

"Oh, sure!" Umber said.

"What do you want?" Flame asked.

"I'll have...uh." Umber thought for a moment. "...eggs are fine I guess."

He got up out of bed and rubbed the side of his face against the blankets while he was getting up. Then he felt something fall on the side of his face so he rubbed his talons against it and could feel the weird rough texture of the surface of whatever was stuck there. He quickly figured out what it was once he peeled it off of his face. It was his bandage that they bought yesterday and the cotton was stained with blood.

Gross, he thought.

He obviously caught the attention of Flame with this and could see the same look of disgust on his face as he stood up.

"We need to change that," Flame said. "I found some more bandages that we had stuffed under the sink last night."

Umber watched as Flame stood up and walked toward the door. He was walking strangely which is something Umber found weird, so he took another look at where he was stepping and could tell that he was intentionally stepping over certain floorboards, making no noise with each step he took. Their floorboards were incredibly creaky and Umber quickly realized that this is how he made him breakfast without waking him up.

"Flame," Umber called out. "why are you walking like that?" He already knew the answer to this but wanted to see if Flame would tell the truth.

"I...uh- I should go get those bandages," Flame hurriedly said. "Y'know, before it gets infected." He began walking faster and before he knew it, he was out the door and in the kitchen.

What a little snake, Umber thought.

Umber began walking toward the door and into the living room

where he could see one of their candles was completely burned down. It was a white candle that was considerably long and thick and was advertised to last at least thirty hours. The white wax was all over the candle holder and the wick was completely burned.

Last night, Umber remembered that Flame had lit that candle once they woke up and they forgot to blow it out before they went to sleep. That candle had at least four to five hours of use left, but not anymore.

Darn it! Umber thought. *That candle was expensive!*

He looked over into the kitchen and could see Flame rummaging through the cabinets under the sink, taking out many different cleaners, garbage bags, and even candles they didn't know they had and setting them on the floor before he stopped and reached all the way in the back, pulling out a bandage. The bandage packaging looked similar to the one he had on before, but it was a little bigger and the packaging didn't indicate it had any alcohol on it already.

"Alright, I found it!" Flame yelled from the kitchen. "It doesn't have any alcohol on it though."

"Do we have any?" Umber walked into the kitchen.

"I don't think so," Flame said as he put everything back in the cupboard that he took out.

Umber walked over to the garbage and threw the dirty bandage in it. He looked down at the bandage as it sat in the garbage, then an image of the SkyWing popped in his head right before he struck him. His eyes were full of hate and confidence and his posture radiated the same energy as he stood tall and kept his arms straight, with no sign of any hesitation or regret in what he was doing. It was as if he didn't think what he was doing was wrong. Just like Icicle.

He gave a visual wince to this and Flame obviously noticed this by the way he shot him a concerned look.

"Umber? Are you okay?" Flame asked.

"O-Oh...uhm, yeah." Umber stuttered. "of course." He quickly turned away from Flame because he didn't want to see the worry in his eyes at this obvious lie.

"Umber," Flame called out. "I know something's wrong. Ever since that dream on the beach, you've been acting strange and I'm getting worried. Can you please just tell me what happened?"

I can't keep lying to him, Umber thought.

"I-...I'll tell you once we get home," Umber said with his back still turned toward him. "I just...don't want to talk about it right now. Not before our anniversary."

"Alright, take your time." There was a moment of silence. "Let's get this bandage on you now."

Umber cautiously turned back around to look at Flame, scared to see the worry in his eyes once again. To his surprise, there was none though. Umber assumed that he didn't seem worried anymore because he agreed to talk to him about it and all he did was stand there with the bandage in his talons waiting for Umber to come over so that he could put it on.

Umber walked over to him while staring at the bandage so that he could see what was going to be on his face for the rest of the day. The main thing he was looking for was how well the bandage blended in with his scales. It was brown, but not quite brown enough for it to be invisible on his scales. Sure, it would be harder to see but you could definitely still see it.

Right as Flame was about to put the bandage on, he pulled his talons back.

"Wait!" Flame exclaimed. "We have to go in the river first."

"Since when are you one to remember to bathe?" Umber asked jokingly.

"Well, today is special," Flame said. "so I'd rather be as clean as possible."

Umber began walking through the kitchen, living room, and toward the back door when he realized that he couldn't hear the footsteps of Flame behind him. He turned around and could see Flame in the kitchen, struggling to get the bandage off of his talons.

"Hurry up Flame," Umber called.

"Just a sec," Flame said. "This bandage won't come off!"

Umber stood there for a few seconds, watching Flame struggle to get the bandage off. Whenever he would pull it off with one of his talons, it got stuck on that one. Then he would try and pull it off with his other talons and then it would get stuck on those too. This went on for a few more seconds before he was finally able to get it off before he threw it in the garbage because the bandage was effectively ruined now.

"There we go," Flame said.

"Quickly! Before we have to leave," Umber said. "I'm not going to swim alone!"

"Calm down, MudWing," Flame said. "I'm coming right now." He began walking over to Umber.

After a few seconds of standing there, Flame finally joined his side and he opened the door.

The bright morning sunlight immediately began beaming into his eyes so he reflexively took a step back and started covering them. His eyes hadn't adjusted to the outside light yet but instead were used to the dim lighting in their house. Most of their windows were covered, except for one in the living room, and their bedroom. Flame didn't seem to be phased though, so he just began walking toward the river.

Umber quickly rushed through the door to catch up with him, his eyes squinting the whole time. He was basically walking blind and the only reason he could find his way was because of Flame talking.

"You okay back there?" Flame asked.

"Yeah, fine. My eyes just haven't adjusted yet," Umber said.

After a few more seconds, his eyes finally adjusted enough to the point where he could at least see where he was going without stumbling all over the place and looking like a dragon that had one too many smokeberries. He could see the winding river with a few dragonets playing in it downstream more, ensuring that they would be left alone while bathing.

Finally, he and Flame got to the river. Umber assumed that the river must be warm enough to swim in if dragonets were swimming in it, but he still wasn't sure because dragonets would swim in anything as long as they were having fun doing it.

One time, Umber came outside on a rainy day to go to the store and watched as a SkyWing was jumping in a muddy puddle. They were sending splashes of mud everywhere and as tempted as Umber was to join them, he remembered that he had to go and get eggs for Flame before the entire thing went bad.

"You coming, Umber?" Flame asked.

"Yeah," Umber said. "just waiting for my eyes to adjust a bit more."

As he stood there waiting for the light to stop hurting his eyes, he felt a set of talons grab his tail and begin to pull. He dug his talons into the dirt as hard as he could to keep his ground, but a second pair of talons latched onto his tail and began pulling even harder. He looked back and could see Flame was already in the river and was pulling him toward it.

"Stop acting like a dragonet and get in here!" Flame said.

He looked around and could see the dragonets were staring at them at this point and whatever game they had been playing before was paused. The group consisted of two SeaWings, a SkyWing, and a MudWing and they looked like they had been splashing around. Not wanting them to see him getting forcefully dragged into the river anymore, he relaxed his talons and let Flame drag him in.

He was yanked into the water with a splash and instinctively began

holding his breath right before he went under. The water was surprisingly warm today; much warmer than it had been recently. He opened his eyes and could see the many different shaped rocks being pushed down the stream right beside Flame's legs.

Instantly, he popped his head back up above the water. His eyes were fully adjusted to the bright sunlight at this point and he could see Flame standing there with a smirk on his face.

"What was that for?!" Umber exclaimed once he could catch his breath.

"We have an anniversary to attend!" Flame said playfully. "We can't waste time *adjusting our eyes*."

"That's in an hour!" Umber said.

"All the more reason to hurry up and get washed off so we can read," Flame said.

"Whatever Flame," Umber said with a laugh.

Umber was looking at the water, thinking of all of the things they would do today. He wanted to make this the best day of Flame's life, so he kept going over everything in his head. His plan was for them to go up to a hill and lay there for a while, then go and get something to eat if he was feeling up to it, then get some tea, and if they had any time left they would go and fly around for a while before going to the restaurant, and then go home.

And then I have to tell him about Crane... Umber thought. *Why did I promise to tell him?! No, I have to tell him, even if I don't want to. I mean, we're dating! We're supposed to tell each other everyth-*

Umber's thought was interrupted by a splash of water hitting him in the face. At first, he thought that Flame had accidentally splashed him, but then another splash came and he quickly realized that Flame was intentionally splashing him in the face.

"Stop it! I'm warning you!" Umber said. He covered his face with his talons but Flame just kept on splashing him. "Okay, that's it! You asked for it!"

Umber unfurled his wings and stuck them in front of him, blocking the incoming splashes of water and setting him up for something he learned to do back in the Mud Kingdom. He dug his wings as far down into the water as he could, to the point where he could feel the rocks at the bottom, and quickly pushed them forward as hard as he could, sending a giant wave of water into Flame.

The wave knocked Flame back into the water with a splash and he swore he could see him swallow a mouthful of river water as he went under and Umber could already feel himself begin to laugh hysterically at this. Just the sight of seeing Flame getting beaten at his own shenanigans made him want to roll over on the ground and laugh until his lungs gave out.

"What the hell was that?!" Flame yelled once he was able to get up.

Standing up in the river wasn't exactly easy since there were many sharp and slippery rocks in the river. Most of them were covered with moss and the sharp ones stabbed you in the bottom of your foot hard enough to make you wince.

"I warne-" Umber was interrupted by another round of laughs. "I warned you!"

"Since when did you become a SeaWing?" Flame asked jokingly.

"I became a *SeaWing* when you wouldn't stop splashing me!" Umber said.

"Fair," Flame agreed.

"Anyways, I think we're probably clean enough by now," Umber rushed.

They had been in the river for at least fifteen minutes at this point and Umber was starting to get worried that they wouldn't have enough time to do everything that he had planned.

"What's the rush?" Flame asked. "You usually try to find any excuse to stay *in* the river, not leave."

"I just don't want to be late," Umber admitted. "I have so much

planned for today and don't want to miss any of it."

"Oh calm down MudWing," Flame said. "We still have like forty minutes until we have to leave. Relax."

"Still, the water's getting a little cold for me anyways," Umber said.

Umber began pushing his way through the water over to the grass. On his way, he stepped on a few sharp rocks that made him wince a few times and he was tempted to slow down, but he didn't want to waste any more time in the river when he could be inside going over the plan another hundred times in his head.

After a few seconds of treading through the water, he finally made it to the grass and stepped up onto the grass. His scales were soaking wet — something he forgot he had to take care of before going inside which only made his anxiety spike even more.

Flame's POV

Flame watched as Umber pushed his way through the water. Normally, Umber would always try to stay in the river as long as he could and Flame would usually stay in the water with him the whole time, but sometimes the water was too cold for him and he would have to get out early. Umber would usually follow a few minutes after, probably because it was boring to lay in the water alone.

Flame began walking through the river behind him, also stepping on some of the sharp rocks in the river that made him slow down a bit, but it only took him a few seconds to get to the grass where Umber was laying down at this point.

He was staring up at the sky and Flame could see the look of anxiety on his face and could tell that he was probably going through all the ways today could be messed up — whether that be from unpredictable weather, something going wrong, or not having enough time were all possibilities of what he could be worried about, so he laid down next to him in hopes to calm him down.

He's so anxious about this, Flame thought.

"Umber...stop worrying about this so much," Flame said. "I'll be happy no matter what happens today."

"It's not that simple," Umber said. "I've been planning it for weeks and don't want it to go to waste at the last second. I've already gotten your hopes up about everything."

"Well, there's nothing you can do about it now," Flame said. "just hope for the best like I did."

Umber then rested his head on Flame's talons, so Flame rested his head on top of Umber's after a few seconds, in hopes to make him feel better. He looked over at the dragonets that were swimming and caught a few of them staring, and they quickly looked away once they caught his gaze.

"You make everything seem so simple," Umber said.

Flame kept his head resting there for a few minutes before remembering that the whole reason Umber was so nervous was because of spending too much time in the river. On top of that, he still needed to have his bandage put on before his cut got infected.

"Alright, time to put your bandage on," Flame said as he lifted his head. "Don't want it getting infected now do we?"

"Oh! I completely forgot about that." Umber gave a little laugh as he popped his head up as well. Flame stood up alongside Umber and they began walking toward the back door.

Flame walked ahead of Umber and swiftly opened the door for him, hoping that it would do something that would subconsciously make Umber calm down about their anniversary.

Something he quickly noticed is that the inside of their house seemed extremely dim compared to outside: probably because the light outside was far brighter than inside, there were only a few candles lighting the room. As he walked in, he immediately bumped into the couch, unable to see it since his eyes hadn't fully adjusted yet.

"Oops," Flame habitually said. Umber bumped into his tail right

after.

He continued walking through the house, back into the kitchen where he previously took everything out and left it on the floor. He bent down and started looking through the cupboard again and quickly found the bandages from before, stuffed in the back.

He quickly took one and turned toward Umber who was already standing in the kitchen behind him, probably waiting for him to find it.

"Alright, c'mere," Flame said as he began unwrapping the bandage from its packaging.

Umber took a few steps forward and tilted his head, allowing Flame to put the bandage on more easily. At this angle, he could see his wound in all of its glory. The SkyWing managed to claw right in between his scales and pierce his skin, and the cut had jagged edges and dried blood and pus, almost looking like his skin had been torn like a sheet of paper and more guilt washed over him.

As he put the bandage on, Umber winced a little at his touch and Flame could already feel anger bubbling inside of him as he felt Umber flinch at just his touch. He kept his anger under control though; he didn't want to have another freak out like yesterday, so he just let out a huff instead.

Umber coming into the house with blood dripping down his face and staining his scales was all too much for him to handle. He tried to keep his anger under control but the more he tried to tame it, the more angry he got until it boiled over and the only thing he could think to do was find that SkyWing and beat the living shit out of him.

Screw that SkyWing, Flame thought.

After a couple of pushes and swipes against his cheek, the bandage was finally on and it definitely didn't look like it was falling off any time soon.

"Alright, done," Flame said. There was a pause. "Does...it still hurt?"

he asked hesitantly — he wasn't sure he'd be able to hear the answer without getting angry.

"It's a little sore around the edges but only hurts when you touch it," Umber said.

Flame could already feel his face begin to turn red with anger and in a desperate attempt to calm down, he remembered something Starf taught him during one of their sessions; it was to control your breathing and count down from ten.

Obviously Umber had seen the look on his face when he said this though because before he could start, Umber quickly added something to what he had said before.

"But it doesn't hurt that much though!" he quickly blurted. "It's nothing!"

"No, it's fine," Flame said softly as he took deep, calming breaths. "I'm calm," he reassured himself.

Flame could see Umber's brow raise in surprise and that gave him a feeling in his chest that he could only describe as a mix of happiness and pride.

This technique is something he usually ignored whenever he was told to do this in the past, but the desperation he was in to not lose control opened up every option to anything he could do to not go on another rampage.

"How about we go read now?" Flame said. "We still have a while before we have to leave."

"A-Alright," Umber said.

Flame turned around and began picking up the different types of cleaners and disinfectants that he still had laying on the floor and swiftly picked each one of them up, setting them back in the cupboard.

He turned around and could see that Umber already had the box out and was sifting through the scrolls, opening each one of them

up until he found the one that they had been reading yesterday. Flame remembered which one they were reading yesterday, the scroll was called "The Guardians of Pyrrhia: The Lost Scroll". It had only been the second scroll in the thirty-five scroll series and they were just getting into it.

As he was walking over, he saw Umber pull out one of the scrolls, take a few seconds to read the title, and then spread it out on the table. He looked at the top of the scroll where the title was and sure enough, the title read "The Guardians of Pyrrhia: The Lost Scroll".

He then took the box and slid it back under the table and sat on the couch waiting for Flame to sit next to him.

Flame finally got over to the couch and sat beside him and then gazed back down at the scroll, trying to remember where they left off last, and after a couple of seconds, he finally found the part they were on. It was a picture of one of the superhero dragons standing in front of their leader, getting orders to go and find the scroll somewhere out in the scorching hot deserts that were somewhere in between the Sand Kingdom and Jade Mountain.

"Here's where we left off," Flame said as he tapped the strip they were on with his talons, trying to indicate to Umber that it was where they had stopped reading yesterday.

"U-Understood," Umber read. "I will try to get the a-assignment completed on time."

This time, Umber didn't struggle nearly as much as he did last time except for a few stutters on some of the longer words, and Flame hoped that it meant he was getting better because it usually took a few times of reading it for him to be able to do what he had just done.

Maybe these scrolls are working after all, Flame thought. *I wish I would've gotten these sooner.*

Flame listened as Umber read through each speech bubble of each of the strips of pictures. Once again, he zoned out while listening to Umber read as he daydreamed about everything they were going to

do today. Millions of things kept racing through his head at once but there was one idea that he knew Umber was going to take him to a fancy restaurant.

He knew Umber all too well to know what he was doing whenever he was going out for hours at a time — though he wasn't entirely sure but was pretty certain of — was going out and looking for different restaurants for them to eat at. He wanted to tell him to go to Jet for it, but he bit his tongue, not wanting him to know that he already knew one of his big plans. He may have even gone to Jet for help already and he just didn't know it.

That restaurant better not be expensive! Flame thought.

As much as Flame enjoyed fancy restaurants, they didn't have the money for it at the time since neither of them had a job at the moment and they were completely relying on the money they had saved. Luckily everything at the Sky Kingdom was extremely cheap because of the many riches that Queen Ruby had and would often overpay for things whenever she would buy from different residents.

Even though he already knew what one of his plans was, he was still excited to see what else Umber had in store for him. He had been planning this for weeks so Flame's hopes were high. He didn't want to admit this to Umber though because he thought that it would only make him more anxious about everything.

As his mind was racing through everything, he realized that Umber was still reading and unaware that he hadn't been listening for any mistakes or errors in his reading, so he quickly diverted his attention to Umber who had only read about two strips in that time.

Umber's POV

About thirty minutes had passed at this point, but to Umber it felt like mere seconds. The new graphicolls that Flame got drew his attention like a moth drawn to a flame. Except the flame was a coiled-up tree with ink on it that just so happened to be a language that most dragons could read. He enjoyed the fact that these had been much easier to read with the big letters and simpler words.

He was so caught up in fact, that he completely forgot that they had an anniversary to celebrate today. Thankfully, Flame didn't seem too focused on the graphicoll he was reading and had warned him that they had to leave in a couple of minutes.

"Umber, time to stop reading," Flame said. "We have an anniversary to attend."

"It's already been that long?" Umber said, confused. "We were only reading for a few minutes though."

"Try thirty," Flame said as he pointed at the sun, and sure enough, Umber could tell that it was definitely a little lower than it had been before.

He quickly coiled the graphicoll back in and put it back in the box, making sure to leave it near the top so that he didn't have to go through each and every scroll to find it again because one thing was for sure: it was annoying to have to do that every time you want to read.

He slid the box back under the table and hurried over to the door, leaving Flame behind on the couch. After realizing that Flame wasn't with him at the door, he turned around and shot him a glare that he hoped would give him the message to hurry up.

Flame then stood up and began fast-walking toward him and was at the door in only a few seconds, so Umber opened the door in advance so that they could leave as soon as possible. The sun was shining and the wind was blowing making for the perfect temperature for being outside all day; not too hot and not too cold.

He stepped out into the warm summer air and the warmth of the sun was beaming against his scales. The weather felt absolutely perfect to him today and he considered falling asleep outside tonight instead of coming back to the house, but he couldn't and he knew it; he promised to tell Flame about his dreams once they got home. As much as that thought scared him, he knew he had to, however, he pushed that thought aside for now because all that mattered now was the joy that followed it being their anniversary and he would be able to spend all day with Flame today. No

interruptions and no distractions.

He jumped into the air and could hear Flame's wingbeats follow close behind him as he soared high above the ground. Once again, he found himself admiring the scenery as he flew through the air since there wasn't much to do while you were flying.

Soon enough, he could see the hill he wanted to lie on with Flame for a while, but he didn't want to just land on the hill and lay there though. He wanted to walk up the hill with Flame so that they were doing as much as they could today that wasn't laying around and doing nothing, so he steered toward the closest path instead.

He began descending down toward it and soon landed in a clearing of the path with a *thump*, leaving the rocks to stick to the bottom of his talons. A few seconds later, Flame landed beside him and he could feel a jolt of excitement run through his body as he, once again, thought of the many different things they would do today.

Author's note: This chapter is a little shorter mainly because I did the math and realized that this will be around 190k-220k words if I keep up these 6k word chapters haha. I'll try to tone it down a little from here and try to start ranging my chapters from 4.5k-5.5k from now on unless people tell me that they like the 6k chapters.

Chapter 10

Flame's POV

Flame looked around the place they had landed. He saw a few markets in the surrounding area, but he didn't think that they would be the place that they were eating at. Actually, he didn't think that they would be eating anywhere right now since it was only nearing the afternoon at this point. That's when he remembered that he completely forgot to make them both breakfast this morning.

Looks like we're gonna have to find something here, Flame thought.

He wanted to wait though. He was going to wait until Umber brought him to the first thing he wanted to do because there was definitely a reason he landed in this specific spot instead of somewhere near the center of the town where all of the more popular markets were. Those markets had far better food than anything near the edge of town; the difference was extremely noticeable, and he was definitely not excited to have to find something around here.

The food around here sat out all day, only being warmed by the sun. The taste of the food was bland, stale, bad, or flat-out tasteless, and sometimes it was a mix of the four. But Flame was definitely excited to see why he had landed here, so he started looking at more places than just the markets.

A few things he noted was a store that seemed to have different types of flowers — Umber was never the type of dragon to give flowers though; he thought it was too generic. There was also a shop that seemed to sell some mid-priced jewelry, but it also seemed unlikely since he had never bought any sort of jewelry before either. Besides, they already had the two necklaces which were more than enough for him. There was one thing he grazed over though, and that was the massive hill they landed near. He didn't think much of it since if Umber really wanted to go up there,

they would've landed on it.

"So, what are we doing now?" Flame asked as he flicked his tail back and forth.

"You'll see," Umber said with a smile. "Follow me." He gestured for Flame to follow.

As they were walking through the busy path, Umber started steering away from it and began walking toward the hill that Flame had looked at before, which confused him. He thought that maybe there was something they had to get along the way, but there really wasn't anywhere to put anything since it was really just a large grassy hill.

"What are we doing?" Flame asked. "Why don't we just fly to the top?" He began to flap his wings and only got a few feet in the air before he felt Umber's talons on his ankle, pulling him out of the air and making him crash into the ground.

"We aren't flying Flame," Umber said with a laugh. "We're going to walk for the rest of today."

"Why would we walk when we can fly though?" Flame asked as he wiped the dirt off of his chest. "Walking is so exhausting! I don't know how scavengers can deal with having to walk everywhere."

"Well, I thought that it'd be nice to actually slow down for once," Umber said. "Besides, I want to move around as much as possible today so that we aren't doing nothing."

Flame was about to say something along the lines of "Flying would be more fun though", but he restrained himself because this is what Umber spent weeks planning, and he sure as hell didn't want to ruin it; he wanted today to go exactly as he planned it to, so he just started silently walking up the hill instead.

After a couple more minutes of walking and in silence they finally reached the top and needless to say, Flame was sweating — Umber didn't seem too tired though. He had never had to really walk anywhere since he was a dragonet so his legs were definitely out of

practice.

"This...this hill is so much...bigger than it looks," Flame panted.

"You're that tired from walking up a hill?" Umber said, confused. "We really need to go on more walks,"

Flame definitely didn't like the sound of having to walk even more than he already did; he hated walking. But if it was something Umber wanted him to do, he would do it as long as he was doing it with him — though, it would probably sound more appealing to walk if he wasn't so hungry right now and the extra workout from walking up the mountain was starting to make him thirsty.

Umber then laid down in front of him, seemingly admiring the view and he signaled Flame to come sit down next to him and Flame happily obliged.

As he kneeled, he could feel that the grass was a lot cooler than the air that felt extremely hot from all of the walking, and immediately began cooling him down. The fresh smell of the summer air was surrounding him, making him feel relaxed as the sweat on his scales slowly began evaporating. After a couple of minutes of closing his eyes and worshiping the break he was getting, he finally cooled down enough and opened his eyes.

He could see the town in all of its glory, stretching all the way to near the middle. All of the houses and all of the dragons could be seen and if he squinted, he could even see their house. He couldn't see any dragonets outside though, but he assumed that it was because they were far too small. Their house already looked like an ant from the hill so the dragonets were even smaller.

"This view is insane!" Flame gasped. "I can see our house from here!"

"Well, I picked it out for a reason," Umber said. "I saw it while I was looking for r-...I mean things to do."

This only confirmed that Umber was going to take them to a restaurant to Flame, but he acted like he didn't hear anything so

that he wasn't disappointed that he ruined the surprise. He knew how it felt to plan something and have it spoiled before you could reveal it, and he didn't want to make Umber go through that.

"What did you say?" Flame said in the most confused voice he could muster up.

"Nothing! Nothing..." Umber said. He definitely looked pretty panicked from where Flame was sitting.

Flame leaned his weight against Umber, snuggling him close as he felt the warmth of his scales.

"I love you," Flame said softly.

"I love you too," Umber said as he rested his head under Flame's neck, to which he rested his head on top of his just like he had earlier. Except this time, he was doing it out of love instead of comfort and all he wanted to do right now was be as close to him as he possibly could be.

They laid like that for at least twenty minutes and Flame could feel sleep pulling him in like a magnet before he felt his stomach rumble, immediately waking him up as he felt his hunger start to rage. He poked his head up and could feel Umber poke his up soon after and shoot him a confused look.

"What's wrong?" Umber asked. Flame could hear concern in his voice, so he quickly spoke up.

"Oh, it's nothing," he said. "I just forgot to make breakfast this morning and I'm starting to get hungry."

"I noticed," Umber said with a laugh. "I didn't say anything though because I didn't know if you wanted to get anything here."

"Well, apparently there's a "no flying" rule today, so I guess we have no choice," Flame joked.

"You know I'd let you fly home to get something to eat!" Umber defended. "So, do you want to get something here, or do you want to go make something at home?"

Flame thought about this for a minute because on one talon, flying home would mean that they would have good food, but it would also come at the cost of breaking his no lying rule, and cost them more time. On the other talon though, they could find something at one of the stalls here. It wouldn't be nearly as good as something Flame could make, but it wouldn't cost them as much time and they would be able to walk. Flame would have to walk all the way back up this hill either way though so he wasn't exactly excited about that.

After a couple of seconds of thinking, he eventually decided on eating there. Sure, the food was worse, but he didn't think that Umber would mind because he would eat practically anything in sight and enjoy it, and they would be saving time so that Umber could do more of the things he wanted to do today.

"We can just get something here," Flame finally said. "Wouldn't want to waste time cooking at home, would we?"

"Are you sure?" Umber asked. "These markets aren't exactly known for quality."

"Nah, It's fine. I've had worse," Flame said. "Besides, I don't think it matters to you anyways."

"I'll eat anything that's edible," Umber joked.

This is exactly what Flame wanted. Hearing Umber laugh and have a good time was a nice change from how things have been recently, especially with the mysterious dreams that he had been having; he agreed to tell Flame about them tonight though, which made him happy because he would finally have the opportunity to help Umber through some of his problems instead of it being the other way around.

Flame began walking down the hill and could hear the tramples of Umber following close behind him. The breeze was picking up at this point, probably because of how high up they had been. Everything in him was telling him that he should be leaping in the air and spreading his wings right now, but he wasn't; he couldn't. Umber already said that today they wouldn't be flying and he was

going to try and honor that the best he could.

At last, he finally made it down the hill. The walk down had been much easier than the walk up and he could already smell the fresh aromas of food and he guessed that the scent was far better than it tasted. The last time he ate something from here, there were flies on the food but he was so hungry and his talons and wings were so shaky that he didn't care. He felt like hurling every time he thought about it and this time was no exception.

"Do you think we'll find anything half decent?" Flame asked jokingly. "I think we'll be lucky to find some leftovers."

"The food around here isn't *all* bad," Umber said. "There are a few good markets around."

"Name one," Flame said.

"Uh- there was that one that-...or maybe that other place that had the..." Umber took a minute to think.

"Mhmm," Flame hummed. "Like I said, nothing good."

"I'm sure there's at least one good place around here," Umber said.

"Probably," Flame said. "The only problem is that we have to find it."

For the next ten minutes, they walked around the paths near the hill, hoping to find something at least somewhat appetizing looking. Little by little, they stopped by every market looking at some of the food they had. Most of them had their food sitting out, while others had their food covered up. The ones that were covered up didn't look like they were anything edible either though, so they skipped those as well.

Eventually, though, they stumbled upon a place that sold loaded baked potatoes. The SkyWing vendor had been baking them fresh, taking them out of a portable oven that was powered by a propane tank, and then setting them under a metal lid where they would sit until someone bought one — which didn't take long.

There were also many different things put out that Flame assumed the SkyWing put in the potato that was also being covered by a clear plastic lid. The toppings consisted of a couple of different cheeses, sour cream, pieces of crushed bacon, guacamole, cream cheese, chives, a couple of different types of beans, and cilantro.

To Flame, this food looked delicious — and it was fresh! The guacamole seemed like it had been made recently, the sour cream and cream cheese was still cold, and the cilantro and chives were freshly cut: all of the things you would normally expect to find in a market near the center of town

He watched as a NightWing came over and ordered a loaded potato with cream cheese, sour cream, chives, and pinto beans.

The SkyWing then took a tray of potatoes out of the oven; their skin was crispy and golden brown. As the SkyWing cut into the potato with a nearby knife, he took a butter knife and began stirring it around until the insides were a paste, then added all of the toppings they asked for and began mixing those around.

At first, he didn't think that there was any possible way he would be able to mix everything around evenly, but after a couple of minutes of mixing, the toppings were evenly coated and distributed throughout the delicious looking potato, and he set it on a paper plate and handed it over to the NightWing who dropped a couple of suns on the counter for him.

"I told you there were good places around here," Umber said.

"Don't flatter yourself, MudWing," Flame said. "There's bound to be an oddball when there's this many bad markets."

He walked up to the stand and began looking at everything one more time so that he could decide what to get. Now that he was closer, he could see that there were pieces of scotch tape on the tops of each cover for the toppings and potatoes that had a price tag on them. The potato itself was one sun, while each topping was a quarter sun.

He looked over at Umber and could see that he was staring intently

at the potatoes and topping, practically drooling at just the sight of them. Needless to say, he was definitely hungry...or he was just being a MudWing.

"Umber." Flame grabbed his attention. "You gonna keep staring or are you gonna tell me what you want?"

"Oh- I'll just have...uhm...one of everything...twice?" Umber replied hesitantly.

"Alright. I'll just have one potato with..." he paused, skimming over all of the options. "sour cream, cheddar, mozzarella, black beans, and chives."

Without a word, the SkyWing took three potatoes out from under the metal cover, and a butter knife then cut it open, and began giving it the same treatment as the last potato for the NightWing, stirring the insides until they were a paste, then adding the toppings and mixing.

After he finished the first potato, he moved on to the second, then the third. In what felt like seconds, all three potatoes had been mixed and were put on two different paper plates and handed to both of them a few seconds later.

"Nine seventy-five," the SkyWing said.

Quickly, Flame pulled out the change with his other talon and dropped the coins on the counter. The vendor counted each of them and then scooped them up, and dropped them in something behind the counter before putting another batch of potatoes in the small oven, probably expecting for someone else to come soon.

He looked down at his plate and could already feel his mouth starting to water. The cheeses had been melted perfectly and the sour cream was mixed in. The beans were also spread evenly throughout the mixture, bringing everything together.

To him, this is something he'd expect to be making, not a random SkyWing with a market on the edge of town. In fact, it looked better than something he could make presentation wise, and he got a little

jealous at this.

He looked over and could see that Umber was already digging into his potato and had already eaten half of it, shoving it down his maw and chomping down on it like he hadn't eaten in weeks, or even months. There were little bits of the potato falling onto the path but he didn't seem to notice.

"Uhm- do you...want a fork or something?" the SkyWing asked awkwardly.

"I think he's probably fine," Flame answered for him. "He does this a lot."

He began walking away, taking a bite of the potato as he walked. He was expecting it to be good, and he wasn't disappointed when he tasted the perfect blend of the cheese, sour cream, beans, and chives all coming together to create the perfect flavor. He could only imagine how much Umber was enjoying his potato right now.

He looked behind him and could see that Umber was still standing there, shoving the rest of the first potato in his mouth and spilling even more crumbs everywhere.

"Umber!" he called out, stopping in place. "I thought you were worried we wouldn't do everything on time! C'mon!"

Umber quickly turned around and stared at Flame with his mouth full of potato.

"Omfkay!" Umber said, spitting potato out of his mouth as the word left his mouth.

Flame went back to walking and Umber quickly caught up with him. They had been out for at least an hour at this point and he could see that the sun was getting low, shooting jolts of excitement through his body like a shockwave hitting him over and over.

He was taking little bites of the potato as he walked, making sure that he wasn't eating it whole like Umber had been just a few seconds ago. He was kind of wishing that he had taken one of the forks when the vendor offered one because eating a potato by

grabbing it and just eating it was awkward for him, but he wasn't about to walk all the way back and waste even more time than they already had.

After a few minutes though, Flame discarded the paper plate by throwing it in a nearby garbage because he was getting tired of holding it when he was already holding the potato the whole time anyways.

Eventually, they got to the base of the hill they had just been at, and just looking up at the hill was already intimidating enough for him as he remembered how he had felt walking up. He was fed this time though so he hoped that it made a difference. Keyword *hoped*.

"Is it just me, or does this hill look bigger than before?" Flame asked jokingly.

"You need to start walking more," Umber said. "We're definitely doing more walking from now on, you lazy SkyWing."

"Hey! I'm not lazy for using my wings!" Flame protested. "Just because they get me everywhere quicker and easier doesn't make me lazy!" He gave a subtle laugh.

"Of course, of course," Umber teased.

Flame knew that he was trying to get a reaction out of him, and it was working. Flame was about to tackle him to the ground and cover him with his wings until he apologized — except he was already walking up the hill before he could follow through. He realized that Umber knew he was about to do something, so he used Flame's only weakness against him: walking.

He reluctantly began walking up the hill, each step being more exhausting than the last. After a couple of minutes, Umber was far ahead of him and he was getting to the point where he felt like his legs would fall off, but he kept going anyway because Umber would have nowhere to run once he got to the top. He thought about flying a few times, just to catch up to him a little bit, but decided against it.

Almost up the hill, he was panting and was getting far too tired to take any more bites of hit potato, which was mostly gone already. He felt like he would pass out if he even took a second to hold his breath for anything; even food.

Exhausted and sweaty, he reached the top of the hill and could see that Umber was already laying down waiting for him. He had a smug look on his face. Right now, he wanted to tackle him more than ever but his legs gave out before he could and he fell into the grass, gasping for air.

"I...I am not walking up this hill again," Flame panted. "You can walk all you want, MudWing. But I am never doing something like this again."

"Suit yourself," Umber said. "If you thought that was hard, just wait for what I have planned next." Umber joked. Flame didn't know he was joking though, so this immediately made him fall over in defeat. "I'm just joking! Wouldn't want you dying on me now would we?" Umber laughed.

"Thank the moons!" Flame huffed.

After a few minutes of laying down, he finally built up the strength to take the last few bites of his potato, and those last bites were some of the best in his life as they instantly gave him a little more energy than before.

Then, he got up and laid down next to Umber, resting his head against him as he closed his eyes and waited for the rest of his energy to come back. He was feeling like he could fall asleep right now, but he knew his body wouldn't let him, no matter how hard he tried so he just laid there. The only times he could fall asleep without being tired were when he and Umber were cuddled up close next to each other.

The wind began picking up once again, cooling him down and giving him a sense of relief. He finally stood up with this and spread his wings so that they could feel the cool breeze as well, trying to make it look like he wasn't trying to take off in case Umber got mad; it's not like he'd actually get mad, he'd just act as he did.

He went and laid back down next to Umber but wasn't nearly as tired as he was before, so he just stared off of the hill and enjoyed the beautiful view it gave and he felt the soft grass against his paws and scales. All of the houses in the distance are lit by the sun, the dragons gliding through the air, and most importantly, the palace peaking through the sky and piercing the clouds. The tips of each circular building around it were a bright red, similar to the color of the SkyWings, while the rest was dark gray and made of stone bricks. He hadn't noticed just how big the palace was until now, which was amazing to him that dragons were capable of building something so big and beautiful

It was moments like these that he was grateful that he went to the Healing Center; grateful that he opened up to the idea of a friend; grateful that he had someone to love.

Umber's POV

Umber was staring at the familiar view, giddy excitement running all through his scales as he thought of the next thing they were going to do. He was going to bring Flame to a new tea place that had just opened up, hoping he would like it more. He never ordered anything too complex though; he just assumed it was because he just didn't have a complex palette when it came to tea, but he did.

"Alright mud muffin," Flame stifled a laugh. "l-lets play a game."

"What game?" he asked, too lost in thought to recognize what he had called him. After Flame went silent for a couple of seconds, he snapped back to reality and replayed the sentence in his head. "Wait, what did you just call me?!"

He stood up at the same time that Flame had and took a couple of steps back, signaling that he was about to do something, but he didn't want Flame to know exactly what. He positioned his stance in a way that made it seem like he was getting ready to grab him when he was actually just planning on tackling him instead.

"The game's called "Mud Muffin's Meltdown" of course," Flame smirked.

"That's a horrible name," Umber confessed.

"Well, it's a work in progress but-" Flame was cut off.

Umber had lunged toward him, his talons opened and ready to pin him to the ground just like he had done a couple of weeks ago, except this time Flame dodged out of the way and left him to hit the ground face first with a *thump*.

As he skidded to a stop in the grass, he could hear footsteps coming toward him quickly, and his war reflexes quickly kicked in after being buried deep down for so many years. Right as he heard Flame's talons leave the ground, he rolled out of the way and heard him pounce on the grass next to him.

As quick as he could, he stood up and lunged at Flame — who was caught by surprise at Umber's speed — and pinned him to the ground, quickly restraining his talons with each of his and staring down into his eyes.

Flame struggled for a couple of seconds before quickly realizing that there was no getting up under Umber's weight. It wouldn't have happened regardless though because Umber had him in a position that's nearly impossible to escape from under any dragons weight

"When did you learn to move like that?!" Flame asked, shocked.

I didn't even know I could move like that! Umber thought. *It's been so long since I've had to...*

"Well, you learn a thing or two when you're fighting for your life," Umber said nonchalantly. He sounded as if he'd been doing this every day for the last year.

"You've really gotta teach me to do that sometime," Flame said.

"I can teach you right now if you want," Umber offered.

"Wait, really?" Flame questioned?

"Of course! Step one is walking halfway up a hill without being winded," Umber said sarcastically.

By the look on Flame's face, he could tell that he definitely didn't like that comment. It also didn't help that Umber still had Flame pinned beneath his talons; his grip wasn't exactly the lightest either — something he always did when it came to fighting, regardless if it was playful or not.

"Oh, whatever MudWing," Flame said.

Umber released his grip on Flame's wrists and rolled off of him into laying down once again, gazing off into the town.

A few seconds later, Flame got up and laid down next to Umber and wrapped his wing around him, and once again, rested his head against him. Even though it was a nice, sunny day outside, the warmth of Flame's wing around him still felt so relieving; it was almost like a blanket being wrapped around you on a cold winter day, except it wasn't cold and it wasn't snowy outside.

Like a broken record, his mind began wandering through his plans. He couldn't stop thinking about how he wanted today to go, constantly changing everything to his liking. But now, everything he was going to do today was final now that they were on the hill.

Okay, tea then restaurant. Umber thought. *What if we get out of the tea place early though? We could just fly around or something like I planned, or we could come back up here and lay down for a while. Flame wouldn't want to walk all the way back up here though.*

Maybe I could let him fly once to get up here? But then I'd completely turn the "no flying" rule backward and let Flame fly anyways. It would only be once though, but what if he doesn't want to fly? What if he figures out that I'm letting him fly because I don't want to see him exhausted? This is all too confusing!

All of these worries were running through his mind at the speed of light yet he still couldn't find an answer, even though his brain was working at super speed. He eventually got tired of all of the thinking and just laid his head down next to Flame's and closed his eyes. Part of him was hoping that everything would fix itself as it went along, but another part of him was worried that everything would fall into chaos last minute.

The comfort of Flame's warmth around him helped ease his anxiety though. Even at his worst — which wasn't often — Flame wrapping his wing around him always helped, no matter how hot it was outside, he'd always let him do it.

30 minutes later

At least thirty minutes had passed at this point and Flame was still laying his head against him with his eyes closed, probably enjoying the rhythmic sounds of Umber's breathing. Flame's wing was beginning to make him sweat, which made him realize that it was getting time to leave.

How long could I lay here without Flame realizing we have other things to do? He wondered. *Minutes, hours, days?*

As unlikely as that last one seemed, he wouldn't be surprised, especially being on such a peaceful hill like the one they were on now, overlooking the whole town and even having a view of the palace would probably make Flame fall asleep the whole time — that is if he wasn't sleeping already. He hadn't moved a muscle in some time so it was definitely a possibility.

"Flame," Umber whispered, nudging him a few times. "Are you awake?"

Flame opened his eyes and looked over up at Umber, shooting him a light smile. He furdled his wing back in and Umber could immediately feel the wind blowing against his scales for the first time in a while.

"Now I am," Flame said tiredly. "What is it?"

"It's time for my next surprise," Umber said, standing up. "It's a little far but all of that sleeping has probably energized you anyways," he joked.

"I was only sleeping for a little while," Flame said, starting to follow Umber down the hill.

Umber was getting excited now just by thinking of the surprise. They hadn't really had much tea recently since they had been so

caught up with everything else, but today was their day and they could do whatever they want. Whether that be to relax, go out and eat, or go to Jade Mountain and visit Umber's winglet; it didn't matter.

It's been a while since I've seen them, Umber thought. *Maybe we can go visit them in a couple of days. I'll worry about that later though. Right now, I want to spend the rest of today with Flame.*

Author's note: Sorry for the late upload, I just got caught up with a few things haha. The writing style is beginning to change once again, which is something you might've noticed near the end of this chapter. I've really been taking a lot more pride in my writing recently though, so expect some improvement. Once again, my discord is Amisgal#8679 if you want to talk, give me suggestions, or send an OC request. Alternatively, you can PM me, which I check up on every couple of days.

Chapter 11

Something I'm just now remembering I forgot to mention in the prologue is that Flame took a vacation from his job at the Healing Center because of everything coming up. They don't just have an unlimited stash of money, I swear haha.

Umber's POV

Umber walked down the hill, down to the nearest path that led to the tea place, which made it so that he had to detour from where they were coming down before. This part of the hill was a lot steeper than the other part which made it a little harder to walk down. He contemplated just gliding down, but stopped himself right before, even though he was afraid he might fall.

"So, what are we doing next?" Flame asked, slowly treading his way down the hill.

"You'll see once we get there," Umber said.

"You're really gonna make me wait?" Flame complained. "C'mon, just a hint."

"Fine, it's something I used to make a lot back at the Healing Center," Umber admitted. "It's also something I used to run into you a lot looking for."

Hopefully, that's enough of a hint, Umber thought. *If he doesn't, I think I'll have to question our relationship.* This was more of a joke than it was serious though; it would raise some questions about how he didn't figure it out.

He looked over at Flame as he thought intently, probably going back and thinking of everything they had gone through together and picking out the ones that would fit best. It didn't take long before he figured out that it was some sort of tea place though, which relieved Umber knowing that he didn't forget.

"Uhm...is it...wait! Is it tea?" Flame figured out.

"Bingo," Umber confirmed. "A new one just opened up around here and I want to go and check it out, so hopefully it's good. I asked around and all of the other dragons said that it was good, so pray to the moons they're right."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Flame said. "It can't possibly be worse than the markets around here."

That was the last thing he needed to think about though; it only began raising more worries.

What if the tea place is worse though? A lot of dragons like the food around here! Umber worried. *What if the dragons I asked just have different tastes and we won't like it? What if they were lying about it? What if everything is too expensive and that's why everyone likes it?* What if this, what if that, were the only questions going through his head, raising millions more with every scenario.

As they walked down the hill, his mind slowly started steering away from those thoughts and began daydreaming about everything ahead of them — their future after today especially. He was hoping that once today was over, they would get closer; that was if it was possible for Flame to love him even more. He worried his heart might explode if he did.

They were finally nearing the bottom of the hill, but Umber had one thing he wanted to do before they got onto flat ground, and that was to trip Flame for that mud muffin comment earlier. He didn't want to actually hurt him though so that's why it had to be done near the bottom.

He stuck his front left leg to the side, causing Flame to yelp, which was soon interrupted by a thump against the grass. He rolled down the hill for a couple of seconds before coming to a stop, seemingly uninjured. He looked a little angry, but Umber knew he'd get over it in a couple of minutes. Looking at Flame like this though made him laugh uncontrollably.

"What was that for?!" Flame asked with a growl, looking up from

the bottom of the hill. Umber didn't stop laughing to answer him though and he had a feeling he already knew why he did it. "Ohhh, very funny, MudWing."

He walked down the hill next to Flame, who was brushing the dirt off of his chest once again — Umber was still laughing of course though.

"D-Don't sweat it, Flame," Umber laughed, patting Flame on the back in a mocking way. He swore he could feel tears form in his eyes. "Every dragon has to take their losses from time to time."

"Whatever," Flame scoffed. "Just know that I'll get you back for that."

"Oooh, shiver me timbers," Umber said sarcastically.

As he calmed down, he continued walking through the small grassy field at the bottom of the hill. There was enough room for trees to grow, which made for a beautiful walk. The leaves were bright green — they almost looked like a RainWing dragonet's scales that got lost somewhere in the Sky Kingdom, except they were a little darker than the usual lime green on their scales.

There are a lot more birds around today, he thought. He suspected it was because it was later in the day now though, which is when they usually came out around here.

They finally made it to the path after a couple of minutes of walking. This path was less populated than usual, which made it easier to walk on without having to bump into other dragons occasionally — the paths weren't exactly wide.

While they were walking, he once again found himself thinking of everything they would do today. He was getting tired of thinking about it though, so he channeled his energy into thinking about what he would order once they were at the tea shop.

Whenever he got tea, he usually got lemongrass with one sugar packet, and a pinch of turmeric, which added a bit of sweetened, earthy flavor to it. This time though, he was going to order

something different; something he's been looking to try for a while now. He was going to order matcha tea with almond milk and a few pumps of vanilla. Matcha wasn't something that was sold at the other tea place which made him especially excited to go to this place.

Umber knew that Flame was probably going to order either a sweet tea or a chamomile tea with a few sugar packets. It was the first herbal tea he ever tried — to Umber's knowledge — and the only herbal tea he's ever ordered.

I wish he would just try a different tea, he thought. *If I ordered for him, I'm sure he'd like it!* He never did let him order for him though, so it didn't matter.

He always assumed it was because he was just stubborn. He seemed to get annoyed every time Umber asked though, so he stopped trying after a while and let him keep getting his sweet tea.

They walked for a while in silence, Umber began to smell the tea shop ahead. The aroma was earthy and sweet, and he could make out a hint of flowers in it. This was one of the things he liked about going to any tea shop. Of course, Flame couldn't smell anything yet because he didn't have nearly as good of a nose as he did.

As they neared the shop, he could see it in the distance. There was a big sign that read "Dragon's Breath Tea House". The first time he saw this, he was able to read it in only a couple of seconds because these were all extremely familiar words.

"There it is," Umber pointed his talon ahead to a shop on the side of the path.

"That's fancy," Flame observed. "Is it expensive?"

"Don't worry about how much it costs," Umber said. "I already did the math and we can afford it."

"A MudWing doing math? That's new," Flame joked.

"Oh, shut up Flame," Umber laughed, lightly hitting his shoulder. "You know I can do math!"

"Well, MudWings never need to do math anyways," Flame said. "They don't even need to count how much is on their plate."

He looked over at Flame's face and could see a massive smile forming across it. It looked like a thousand different rays of sunlight all gathering into one and he felt a surge of excitement and happiness run through his body, and he swore he could feel his heart skip a beat. He thought that he had to be the most handsome dragon in Pyrrhia — well, second if you included Qibli, but that was hardly fair so he ignored that part.

As they got to the door, Umber looked inside and could see that the place was packed, especially for a place that had just opened hardly two weeks ago. He's walked past this place a few times but has never gone in because he wanted everything to be a surprise for both of them.

The floors were made of shiny wooden planks, and there were windows all over the walls so that you could see outside, and medium-sized shiny round tables scattered all over the place. The tables that were empty — which weren't many — already had a menu on them, along with a tea cup, a bell, and a few tea coasters that had different designs and writing on each. The place wasn't that big either, only having around fifteen tables for different dragons to sit, each having two seats on either side.

They walked in through the glass doors, and he could immediately feel the cool air against his scales and could already feel the relaxed atmosphere. Umber inhaled deeply, adjusting to the cool air around him

"Hello!" a nearby SkyWing waitress said. "I can get you two a seat right away."

Without saying anything, they both followed the SkyWing waitress to a table near the back to a table by the wall, giving a perfect view of the outside. Just like all of the other tables, this one had the tea, the coasters, and the menus already set up for them. They both sat down on either side of the table and the waitress walked off, probably giving them both time to order.

Umber already knew what he was going to get though, and Flame only ever chose between two things so they would just be sitting here, talking most of the time.

"Do you think this place has sweet tea?" Flame asked. "I mean, I know it's fancy and all but I don't really want any of that herbal stuff right now."

"Look at the menu," Umber suggested. "I'm sure they have something. If they don't then it looks like I'll have to order for you after all."

"I'll just get that chamotile tea if they don't," Flame said.

"Chamomile," Umber corrected.

"Whatever," Flame said. "I just want to get something I know I'll like since it's our anniversary."

Oh well, I'll eventually get him to order something else, Umber thought. *He can't just drink sweet tea and chamomile forever.*

He looked out the window and watched the many dragons walk up and down the paths and began daydreaming about him and Flame opening a restaurant; like how he would do it, how they would manage everything, and who they would hire. It was something Flame wanted to do, so it was something he wanted to do as well.

On one talon, they would have to work tirelessly every single day at the start to keep it up, but on the other talon, he would be able to spend all of that time cooking with Flame. Not only that, but they would have enough money to move out of the crappy house they were renting — heck, maybe they would even be able to buy Avalanche a house if it got popular enough.

These were all dreams though and were unlikely to actually happen. Even though Flame was a great cook, he knew that it takes a considerable amount of luck for your restaurant to actually gain any traction in the Sky Kingdom since you'd be competing with hundreds of other equally good restaurants.

"So," Flame said, snapping Umber back to reality. "What do you

have planned next, MudWing?"

"After this?" Umber questioned — though, it wasn't really a question more than it was confirming. "I have one more big surprise after this but I think we'll have to wait a while if we leave too early."

"Well, then how about we take our time here?" Flame suggested. "This place is nice."

"I don't want to be late though," Umber admitted. "I don't know exactly when we have to be there, but I know it's later today."

"Oh, stop your worrying," Flame urged. "Keep it up and I'll give you a reason to be worried later."

Umber didn't know exactly what this meant, but he had a few ideas. Regardless, this wasn't going to stop him from worrying. If it worked like that then It'd be a miracle that he and Flame even met in the first place. He knew that he was just trying to calm him down though, so he just acted like it had worked.

He sat there for a few minutes, scraping his talons through the ridges in the table while he waited for the waitress to come back so that he could tell her what he already knew he wanted. His wish was granted when he heard talons stop at his table, to which he quickly looked up with contentment.

"Are you two ready to order?" the waitress said in a welcoming and friendly voice. It seemed a little forced though, but Umber assumed she had to talk like this to everyone.

Something he quickly noticed is that she was holding a small notepad in one talon, along with a black pen in the other. He didn't pay any attention to this though since he already knew what she was going to do with it.

"Oh- yes, we're ready," Umber said. "I'll just get a matcha with some almond milk and two pumps of vanilla." He watched her write down a few things on the notepad she was holding; probably what he had just said. "What do you want, Flame?"

"I- uh, I'll just get a sweet tea if you have that," Flame said,

stuttering over a few words.

"Anything else?" the waitress confirmed.

"No thank you," Umber said.

She gave a nod and then slowly walked over to the other side of the room where two dragons were sitting down, and took their orders before scurrying off into the kitchen to give it to the workers.

"The master of tea is mixing it up I see," Flame joked.

"Well, this place has matcha which isn't something the last place had so I wanted to try it," Umber explained. "I've heard that it's pretty good." He intentionally tried to talk it up in hopes that Flame would change his mind about the sweet tea.

"Well, you can enjoy your ground up grass while I enjoy my sweet tea," Flame said wryly.

"They're leaves actually," Umber said. "not grass."

Umber went back to looking out of the window and once again felt his mind wander to daydreams; he began thinking about how their dinner would go and whether or not Flame would freak out about the prices of everything, where he would tell him that everything was free and he would order whatever he wanted.

I wonder what he'll do when he figures out that Avalanche was the whole reason we could go to a restaurant in the first place, Umber thought. *He's definitely going to want to thank her tomorrow or something.*

As he was deep in thought, he heard talons clacking against the floor and the familiar clinging of a kettle, to which he turned around and was immediately smacked in the face with the fresh smell of fresh matcha. Now that he could see, he realized that she was actually holding two silver kettles; one full of matcha, and the other full of Flame's sweet tea. He could see the steam fuming from the tip of them, and his worries and anxiety were immediately whisked away like a feather in the wind.

"Alright, here's your tea," she said, as she poured it into Umber's tea cup until it was just about full. "...and here's yours." She moved onto Flame's, filling it just about the same. "Refills are free until this runs out, then you'll have to order more," she signaled toward the kettle.

"Oh- thank you," Umber said, picking up his cup and putting it to his lips before immediately putting it back down from the heat. "That's hot!" he jumped.

He looked over at Flame, who was about to take a sip of his before quickly setting it down on his coaster after seeing Umber's reaction to it.

"Yeah, our stoves are brand new so they kind of make everything incredibly hot when it's being heated," she laughed nervously.

"Really? How much were the stoves?" Flame questioned curiously.

"I don't know the exact numbers, but I remember that birds kept stealing a bunch of the expensive pipes while this place was being built so they had to cheap out on a lot of them."

"Birds stealing pipes?" Umber questioned as he blew on the tea. "That's odd."

"Yeah, I know, right!" she laughed "I've never seen them do that before!"

Umber looked down at his tea and could see that there was considerably less steam coming off of it than there was before, so he took a sip of it and could tell that it was the perfect temperature to drink right now. It tasted sweet, but a little bitter with a little bit of natural tasting nuttiness mixed into it; he could already tell that this would be the tea place he was going to go to from now on and he quickly took another sip of it, eager to taste the bitter-sweet green mixture again.

"Speaking of birds," the waitress continued. "have you noticed how many more Cranes are out today? I saw-"

Crane... Umber panicked.

She was interrupted by Umber choking on his matcha, spitting it out as a natural reflex. Just hearing the word Crane set him off; regardless if they were talking about the bird, or Crane herself. The tea got all over the table, catching both Flame and the waitress off guard as it flew through the air and landed on the table in little droplets that quickly combined into a few puddles.

His heart began racing at the speed of sound, each thump bringing him further and further into thought as his mind flickered through snippets of Crane laying in the black abyss that was flooded with blood; her throat gushing and her pupils dilated.

"Oh my-" the waitress said over Umber's coughs. "I'll go get some napkins right away!"

He looked over at Flame, who was gazing at him with an obviously concerned look on his face, so he tried to stop coughing as soon as he could but couldn't — coughing is a natural reflex after all. He looked down at the table, focusing on the valleys of the wood as he tried to hide his panicked expression, quickly realigning his face to look relaxed. Obviously Flame picked up on it though, because he ran over to the side of the table.

"Umber?" Flame called out as he rushed over. "Are you okay?" he said as he patted his back.

As his talons patted along his back, Umber felt himself begin to calm down from Flame's gentle touch. It was as if just his talons had the power to soothe the storm that was beginning to rage in him. Like a warm fire on a cold night, his talons gave him instant relief.

"Yeah- *cough,* I'm fine," Umber reassured as his heart rate began to slow.

The waitress quickly came back with a bunch of napkins, to which Flame took them from her and began wiping the tea off of the table while Umber coughed as much of the tea out of his lungs as he could. He looked around and could see that some of the other dragons in the restaurant had their heads turned and were staring at the scene, which made Umber a little embarrassed at the realization.

"Thank you," Flame said to the waitress.

"Of course! No problem," she said, walking off to take more orders.

That's when Flame stared at him like he knew something was wrong for a good couple of seconds. Judging by everything that's happened so far, he was probably about to pry once again. Even though he was going to tell him about everything tonight he still wanted at least something to go off of now so that he could prepare for it.

He ultimately seemed to realize that Umber had already promised to talk to him about whatever he was going through tonight, so he backed off and went back to his seat.

They sat there awkwardly for a couple of minutes, slowly sipping away at their tea until Umber rang the bell at the table, looking for a refill from his pot.

"So," Flame said, breaking the silence. "you got any hints to give on what you're doing next?"

"Flame, I'm not spoiling another thing for you," Umber said wholeheartedly, pretending like nothing had happened before. "Besides, you'll find out soon enough anyways."

"Aww, come on," Flame whined. "You've gotta give me *something*. How do you expect me to sit here and actually have to find out by waiting?"

"By sitting there and actually having to find out by waiting, of course,' Umber joked.

That's when he heard talons clacking against the wooden floor behind him. His mind instantly went back to the fact that he had rung the bell — something he had completely forgotten about already.

"Yes?" the SkyWing waitress from before said.

"Oh- could I just get a refill on my tea please?" Umber said.

"Of course! Yours was the matcha, correct?" the waitress asked.

"Mhmm," Umber confirmed.

"Alright, I'll go get that for you right away," the waitress said.

She walked off somewhere in the back of the kitchen for a couple of minutes before coming out with the same silver kettle from before.

He held his teacup out and she carefully poured it in, trying not to spill it. The tea cups weren't exactly easy to pour something into because of their size either, which made Umber a little nervous from the risk of hot matcha being spilled all over his talons.

"Well, let me know if you need anything else," she said enthusiastically before walking away.

Flame's POV

As Flame watched Umber drink his disgusting looking grass juice, he began to think about what had happened a few minutes ago. He thought that it was a little strange that he reacted like that, so he went back and replayed the sentence in his head a few times.

"*Have you noticed how many more Cranes are out today?"* he thought, picking through each word and reflecting them against Umber's past like he was reading a book. That's when he got to the word Crane, and it immediately clicked. *Crane! It has something to do with her, but what? I mean, I know he watched her die and all, but there has to be something more to it than that. But what? Why am I even thinking about it though? He said that he was going to tell me tonight.*

He felt kind of like a detective as he was putting the pieces together; except detectives don't live in a trashy house and drink tea he knew they couldn't afford with his boyfriend, who constantly gave him things he didn't deserve in a million years.

Regardless, he forced himself to stop thinking about it and instead distracted his mind with something else. Something like how the tea tasted, or the good decorative taste the owner had, or even some of the other dragons' conversations he could overhear. Technically it was eavesdropping, but he didn't really care;

anything to keep himself from overthinking it.

Eventually, though, he finished his tea and was no longer in the mood to sit here in silence.

"Umber," Flame grabbed his attention. "How about we go and do something else? We could go back up on that hill if you want and enjoy the view or something while we wait to go to that other place."

"Or we could fly around for a while," Umber said. "I don't want to spend all day on that hill."

"What happened to "no flying"?" Flame questioned.

"Whatever Flame," Umber laughed, "We can fly around for a while until we wait for tonight."

"If you insist, MudWing," Flame said, ringing the bell so that he could pay for their tea.

A few seconds later, the same waitress once again came over. Except this time, she had a few kettles of tea on a tray, assumingly about to give them to dragons at some other table. Looking around, he could see that there were at least a few more dragons than were in here earlier, and seemingly nobody else going around and taking orders.

Don't they have anyone else to come and see us? Flame questioned. *This place is new though, but still. They can't just expect one dragon to be able to wait this whole damn place!*

"Hello! Do you need another refill for your tea?" she asked.

"No thanks," Flame said. "We're just getting ready to leave."

"Are uh- are you the only one waiting here?" Flame questioned, shifting his wings a bit so they weren't being crushed by the back of the chair.

"There's a couple others, but they didn't show up to work today," the waitress said. "so that leaves me to do everything while they're

gone."

"What?! That's crazy!" Flame exclaimed. "How do they expect *one* dragon to take care of this whole place?!"

"It's not that big of a deal, really," she said enthusiastically, seemingly like she didn't even care that she was being overworked and underpaid. "We all do our part here. I'm just doing mine."

He took another look at her face, trying to find even a little bit of anger showing through her forced personality that she had to put on, but there wasn't. So she was either really good at faking it, or she genuinely didn't care about her mistreatment. That was outrageous though so that couldn't have been the case.

"You know," Umber interjected. "I've been thinking of getting a job recently if you're still hiring."

"I already work though, Umber," Flame pleaded. "You should just be staying at home and-"

"No," Umber said firmly. "It's not fair that you have to work and I don't!"

"Well, we have applications out in the front. You can pick one on the way out if you're really thinking about applying," she paused with a moment of realization. "Oh moons! I should be delivering these right now! I'll go get your bill in a minute here!" She paced toward another table on the other side of the room.

Once Flame was sure that she was gone, he put in his two cents.

"Umber, you're not getting a job here," he said.

"Sure I am!" Umber said. "How's it fair that you have to work and I get to stay home and do nothing all day? Besides, if I got a job then we could move out and get a real place soon! Doesn't that sound great?"

"Yeah, but- you'll have to deal with dragons like that one from yesterday all the time!" Flame pointed out. "I don't want to see you get hurt like that again."

"Flame, I've told you once and I'll tell you again. I'll be fine," Umber said. "Besides, there are at least twenty other dragons in here at all times that I'm sure would protect me if anything *did* happen."

After a moment of thinking, he realized that this was something Umber wanted to do, and he wasn't going to keep him from doing it all because of his stupid worries. He was, however, going to pick him up from work every day if he could just so that he knew he was safe before he got home.

"Fine," Flame reluctantly agreed. "But on one condition. I get to pick you up from work every day so that I know you're safe."

"Alright," Umber agreed as if it was nothing. "So...do we have a deal then?"

"I guess we do," Flame said.

That's when he heard the door to the back kitchen swing open and watched as the waitress from before came over with a piece of paper in her talons. As she got closer, he recognized it as their bill for everything that they had ordered.

"Alright, your total is eight and a half suns," she said.

Wait, that's not too bad of a price, Flame thought. *I thought this place was expensive! Eight suns for two full kettles of amazing tea?*

Flame took the rest of the suns he had — which weren't many — and counted them. Luckily, he had just around ten suns left, which was just barely enough to pay for both of their teas. He dropped them on the table to which the waitress scooped them up and retreated back into the kitchen.

They both stood up and walked toward the front door and now Flame could see the application papers right by the door. They were in a beige bin that looked like it had been taken straight out of Starf's office; bland and boring, hiding with the wall behind it like it had just escaped from Queen Ruby's jail.

As they walked out the door, Umber grabbed one of the papers in the bin, folded it up, and stuffed it under his wing.

He could feel the sun against his scales now, reflecting off of them and making them shine like a mirror. He didn't even realize his scales were this shiny, but it definitely had something to do with the bath he had in the river earlier.

Umber then launched himself into the air, spreading his wings and ascending. Flame quickly followed, catching up with him fairly quickly.

Once they were high in the sky, they flew around with no real direction or way, just kind of looking around at the scenery below and enjoying the view of everything in the surrounding area. He had to admit though, that it was much nicer to be sitting on that hill and looking over everything than to be flying since you were constantly moving and couldn't get a good view of everything over the occasional gust of wind that would blow you around a couple feet.

Right now though, he could appreciate everything that was happening. He was right here, right now, with the dragon he loved most, doing one of his favorite things on an extremely special day that he would likely remember for the rest of his long life with Umber.

Chapter 12

Flame's POV

"Gotcha!" Flame yelled as he tackled Umber in mid-air

They had been playing air tag for the last forty-five minutes at this point, waiting for it to get dark. Flame had the idea that they played the game; though Umber called out a clear disadvantage on his end, he played anyway though because it was better than doing nothing.

Falling through the air now, Flame let go of Umber, spreading his wings and leaving Umber to fall for a couple more seconds until he flew back up to him. He was laughing and smiling, definitely excited for what he was about to show Flame next — little did he know, Flame already knew what he had planned though.

I wonder if he knows that I know we're going to a restaurant, Flame thought. *Oh well, I'll just act surprised so that I don't make him feel bad.*

He was tempted to go up to Umber a few times though and ask him where they would be going next, then act like he read his mind like Darkstalker could and tell him. These were all just silly intrusive thoughts though and he didn't want to actually tell Umber that he knew everything as much as he thought he wanted to.

As Flame looked up in the sky, he could see that the sun was setting which meant it was getting about time for them to leave for the restaurant. He noticed that Umber picked up on this at the same time he did — he got a weird giddy excited look on his face with a huge smile forming within a matter of seconds.

"Flame!" Umber called out with excitement flooding through his voice. Their wingbeats were loud, so he had to yell over them. "It's almost time for my last surprise!"

"Well, we better hurry then, MudWing!" Flame said, matching his excitement. Then, Umber turned around and started flying toward the direction that Flame assumed was the restaurant.

He began flapping his wings, following close beside Umber, looking around the surrounding area to see if he could spot the restaurant before they got to it. As he was looking though, he spotted a big building that was lit up like a candle. It was decently sized and it looked pretty fancy from the outside with complicated arches made of black stone with a bunch of windows — he wondered if he could fit through one of them if he needed to. There were also many different complicated designs, and finally, a massive sign on the front that read "Where Ends Meat".

This has to be it, Flame thought. *I mean, look at this place! This is definitely something that Umber would do. Wait...how much does this all cost?!*

As much as he wanted to get mad at Umber right now, everything was probably already set in stone and there was nothing that he could do about it now. He remembered that he had already said that he figured everything out beforehand though. He trusted Umber more than any other dragon in Pyrrhia, so they must have the money for it or he would've probably found another place to eat.

Regardless, he wasn't going to buy anything too expensive because the entry fee was most likely already enough.

"Alright," Umber said, immediately interrupting Flame's thought. "this is the place." He swooped down toward the path and landed in a clearing next to the restaurant, and Flame quickly did the same.

"Looks...expensive," Flame commented.

"Oh, just you wait," Umber replied as he started walking.

Flame quickly followed, looking at the front door the whole time. Once they got close, he could see that there was a NightWing at the front door, watching for anyone who might be coming up. He seemed to be looking around the crowd for someone specific which

he thought was weird because greeters can hardly even remember your name usually.

Whoever it is must be pretty damn important if even he remembers them, Flame thought.

That's when he looked over at them and immediately stopped his search as he eyed them both down as they walked near. He could even make out the familiar look of guilt trickle along his face for a couple of seconds, which Flame thought was a little weird. But he ultimately summed it up to him misreading his expression.

Once they were in earshot of the door, the NightWing finally spoke up instead of just staring at them like a creep.

"Umber!" the NightWing exclaimed amicably. "I assume this must be your...significant other." He seemed a little awkward about the fact of male-on-male relationships, but that wasn't the thing Flame was focusing on the most right now.

How does he know Umber? How does he know I'm dating Umber? He really must've gone all out on this whole anniversary thing. Way further than I would be willing to go.

"I just want to say I'm sorry for what happened yesterday," the NightWing continued. "and for that reason, Maelstrom has raised the limit from one hundred to one hundred and fifty suns."

"Really?!" Umber said in disbelief. "That's great! Do you hear that Flame? We can get all of that food for free!"

Wait, what the fuck? Flame thought with a mix of surprise and confusion. *How did he manage to convince the owner to give up a hundred and fifty suns for free?!*

"Umber...how did you even get all of this for free?" Flame questioned.

"Well, I'd be lying if I said that your mom didn't have something to do with it," Umber admitted.

"She set this all up? How? When did she get that kind of money?"

Flame interrogated.

"I'll tell you all about it once we're inside," Umber said hurriedly. "I want to see what kind of food they have already!"

Flame looked past the NightWing, through the window on the door, and could see the inside was just as fancy as the outside with red carpets and shiny tables that had a candle, silverware, a menu, and a napkin holder that was full of napkins on each. The place was packed full of dragons, leaving only a couple of seats left for the two of them: one by the window, and one near the middle of the restaurant. He wanted to be seated in the one in the middle because he personally didn't like window seats; regardless though, he wasn't going to say anything about it.

There was also a door to the kitchen which looked extremely out of place. It was a white metal door that had its top rounded instead of it being rectangular. This was probably on purpose though so that dragons didn't just walk into the kitchen without realizing.

They walked in and the smell of all of the food smacked him in the face. The different aromas of the perfect steak, fish, stews, soups, and pastas flooded the air like a symphony of smells, circling around his face and making his mouth want to water. He resisted the urge to do that though; he wasn't going to stoop down to a MudWing's level. Not in front of all of these dragons at least.

Once he was inside, he could see that there were many different tapestries on the ceiling. Some being of the beautiful night sky filled with stars, and others being wildlife in their natural habitat. One even depicted dragons flying through the sky over a beautiful savanna with the sun setting in the background, spewing its vibrant oranges, reds, and yellows all throughout the tapestry.

There's so many, Flame thought in amazement. *This place must've cost a fortune to build! I can't believe that Umber managed to get in here for free!*

The NightWing from before followed them in and guided them to their seat which was the one near the middle of the restaurant, which gave Flame a bit of strange relief that he didn't have to get

stared at by a bunch of dragons while he was eating.

As they were walking, he looked at many other dragons sitting down and eating while talking to each other. Now that he was close, he could see that they all had expensive jewelry on. Most of them had gems embedded in their scales with a necklace or bracelet, and others didn't — they probably didn't want to go through the painful process of getting one in because they just had more necklaces and bracelets instead.

He assumed that most of these dragons were probably on a date if they weren't already together. The others were most likely family since most of the tables were two-seaters except for a select few that were long tables, mostly full of dragons.

Finally, they got to the table and were seated with Flame sitting on one end and Umber sitting on the other, similar to how it was at the tea place. He had to put his tail in between the holes in the chair which wasn't something he usually did because it could get stepped on by accident; this chair was small though, so he had to.

The NightWing quickly blew a tiny plume of fire onto the candle on their table before sliding it to the middle so that it was between both of them.

Flame could already feel his love growing for Umber right now and all he wanted to do was kiss him, but he wasn't going to do that yet, not in front of all of these dragons; that was going to be saved for later. Right now, he was going to enjoy the nice food instead.

"You two have a wonderful time here," the NightWing said before walking back to the door to watch for any other dragons who might be coming.

Once Flame was sure that the NightWing was gone, he stared at Umber with a faint smile — enough of a smile to be recognizable as a smile anyways.

"Umber...you really went all out for this," Flame said sincerely. "This is like...anything I'd ever be able to do times a thousand!"

"Well, I'm glad you like it," Umber said with a light laugh, mirroring his expression. "I went through a lot to get in here. If it wasn't for Avalanche, I think we'd probably be eating at one of those stands right now!"

"How did she help you with all of this anyways?" Flame asked.

"Well, it turns out that a former member of the Talons of Peace owns this restaurant," Umber answered. "She just so happenes to be close with him, so she pulled a few strings and got us everything for free!"

All of that for us? Flame thought. *I'll have to visit her tomorrow to thank her.*

"Anyways," Umber continued. "How about we read the menu and get ready to order? I'm sure someone is going to be checking on us soon."

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that part," Flame said with a chuckle.

He picked up the paper menu and began reading through all of the different things he could order. There were filet mignons, tenderloins, many different types of fish and lobster, vegetable stews and soups, meat stews and soups, different wines, and even caviar as a side.

He ultimately chose that he was going to order some pan-seared salmon with a side of caviar and a glass of wine. He wasn't much of a drinker though — actually, he's never had a sip of alcohol in his life until today. He was excited to try it though.

All of the other fancy dragons drink it so it can't be THAT bad, Flame thought.

"What are you gonna order?" Flame asked.

"Oh, I don't know," Umber said. "I think I'm probably just going to get a couple of steaks."

"Oh, C'mon MudWing," Flame protested. "you can do better than that! I mean, look at this menu!"

"Ugh, fine," Umber scoffed sarcastically. "I'll just have to order *more* food then."

He looked back down at the menu for a couple more minutes, probably reading off all of the options before coming to a decision. I mean, how could he only order a couple steaks? There was so much on this menu that it was impossible to *only* order one thing!

"Uhm...I think I'll get...two steaks, the shrimp scampi pasta, and...maybe a little bit of red wine?" Umber said — though, that last part sounded more like a question that it did him saying he would, but Flame wasn't going to answer a yes or no; he could get whatever he wanted. He was an adult after all. "Yeah, I'll get the red wine," he said with a bit more confidence. "What are you getting?"

"I think I'm gonna get the pan-seared salmon with a side of caviar, and some red wine, too," Flame said.

"Ooo, fancy, " Umber commented.

They sat in silence for a few minutes and Flame looked around the restaurant, staring as the waiters walked around with plates of food, setting it on dragons tables, who instantly began digging into the delicious meal as they talked. Some of the bigger tables had all of the food stacked in the middle like a feast with them taking whatever they could onto their plate.

Must be a special thing they do here, Flame thought. *I've never seen a restaurant do that before.*

Finally, a waiter got to them. He was a SkyWing with fancy necklaces and bracelets on with a plug in his ear. It wasn't too big, but it seemed pretty painful to have put in and Flame winced at just the thought of it.

"Are you two gentlemen ready to order?" he asked in a very distinguished voice.

"Yeah, I'll get the pan-seared salmon with a side of caviar, and some red wine." Flame paused, giving him a minute to write everything down. "And he'll get a couple steaks, shrimp scampi pasta, and some

red wine too."

"And how would you like your steak done?" the waiter asked.

"Medium rare," Umber quickly said.

"Alright, I'll get that with you two shortly," he said as he began to walk away in the direction of the kitchen door.

As he left, Flame turned his head back to look at Umber and gazed affectionately at him with a smile while he admired his face, thinking about how he must be the most handsome dragon in Pyrrhia by far.

Umber was staring back, mirroring his expression once again, and was probably thinking the exact same thing if Flame were to guess. They did this for a couple of minutes before he heard the talonsteps of a dragon walking behind him and he turned around to see a different waiter from before, holding a big plate with breadsticks and dip on it.

"Here are your appetizers," the waitress said politely. "If you run out, you can call one of us over and ask for more at no extra cost."

"Oh- thank you," Umber said, picking up one of the breadsticks, dipping one in the sauce, and putting it in his mouth. Immediately, his eyes went wide and he went back for seconds, dunking the breadstick back in the sauce and into his mouth.

"Ah, come on Umber! Don't double dip!" Flame said playfully.

Umber tried saying something back, but it only ended in him spitting up crumbs of fresh bread all over the table. He quickly swept them off like any distinguished dragon would and swallowed the mouthful of bread he had.

"You'll put your tongue in my mouth, but you won't dip your breadsticks in the same dip I put mine in?" Umber said wryly. "Anyways, you should try these breadsticks! They're so good!"

"Well, first of all, you do it too! And second of all, that's different," Flame protested as he grabbed one of the breadsticks. They were

soft and warm, and he could see that there was salt sprinkled on the top — definitely fresh as ever.

He dipped it in the yellow-beige colored sauce, making sure to get a reasonable amount on the end of the breadstick before putting it in his mouth. Sure enough, he was immediately hit with the perfect balance of tangy and savory with a bit of garlic and salt, making him immediately want to go back for more just like Umber had.

These are better than my breadsticks! How did they manage to get these to taste so good? It has to be some sort of old secret recipe!

"These are actually really good," Flame said nonchalantly as if he didn't just have the best damn breadsticks he's ever had in his life. He couldn't tell if it was a bit of jealousy, or the fact that he didn't want to stoop down to Umber's level and go back for more — or a mix of both.

"Flame, you need to figure out how to make these!" Umber begged.

"I can try, but no promises, MudWing," Flame said. "I doubt they'll just *give* me the recipe."

"Well, I guess that means we'll have to savor them while they last then," Umber said, picking up another breadstick and dipping it in the sauce, but making sure to eat it suspiciously clean.

Seeing this made Flame stifle a bit of a laugh in an attempt to not break out in hysteria in front of all these dragons. Somehow, seeing Umber eat normally for once was the funniest thing in the world. The fake smug look on his face only added to the act.

"What?" Umber said in his most distinguished voice, obviously noticing Flame's face. "This is how I normally eat." He took another bite of the breadstick.

Seeing this made Flame break out into a laugh; he couldn't hold it back anymore. Umber was just acting too much like all of the stuck-up, self-important dragons around here while also managing to seem like the least stuck-up, self-important dragon in the restaurant.

Obviously, seeing Flame's reaction was funny enough to Umber that

he broke out into a laugh with him. They sat there and laughed for a couple more seconds before finally calming down and realizing that a few dragons had been staring at them the whole time with disgusted looks on their faces. Flame didn't care though; he would've done the same thing as Umber did to their face right now if it didn't mean that he'd break out into another hysterical laughter.

"So," Umber said as he calmed down. "how have I done so far?"

Flame was kind of taken aback by this question because he thought that it was already pretty obvious how well he's managed to pull everything off so far. This was better than their first date! Regardless though, he knew Umber was looking for some sort of confirmation.

"Umber, so far this has been one of the best days of my life!" Flame said enthusiastically. "Only second to the day we met of course." He paused, taking Umber's talons into his and immediately switching the mood with an affectionate gaze. "Umber, I love you, and I can't imagine my life without you. If it weren't for you, I'd probably still hate everyone and everything around me."

"I-I love you too," Umber said, obviously caught off guard a little by Flame's answer. Flame swore he could feel his heart jump and begin to speed up at this, so now there was only one thing left to do.

Time felt like it had slowed down to a halt around them as Flame reached his neck across the table and closed his eyes, only to meet Umber's lips soon after, their talons still touching. He immediately felt a rush accompanied by a warm bubbly feeling in his chest as they kissed. A wave of emotions had rolled over him, only making him feel one thing: love. He wished that he could stay in this moment forever, with Umber's hot breath against his face.

After a couple of seconds, Umber finally pulled away to catch his breath all while staring into Flame's eyes intimately and all he wanted to do was go back in for seconds, but he couldn't; not here. They were already getting even more looks than before, but he didn't care. He did have the decency though, to not make out with Umber right in front of everyone.

He slowly sat back down in his seat, smiling with contentment about everything that's happened so far today.

Umber looked pretty embarrassed when he saw the stares they were getting, so Flame looked around at a few of the dragons that were staring and growled at them, baring his teeth and giving them a keep-staring-and-I'll-rip-your-fucking-nose-off face and they immediately retreated. This definitely made Umber feel a bit better judging by how his expression relaxed a bit and there was a hint of a smile now.

"I- uhm- here's your food!" one of the waitresses said who had been watching the whole scene. She quickly put a plate, bowl, and glass of wine in front of Flame. Then she set down a plate, a tin, and a glass of wine in front of Umber and quickly scurried off.

He looked at the plate and could see that there were two steaks on it and a bowl that had some sort of pasta in it. That's when he realized that the waitress was so flustered that she had given him Umber's order instead of his.

He looked up at Umber and chuckled a bit before they awkwardly switched their meals while trying to dodge the candle the whole time so that they didn't burn themselves.

They snickered about it for a couple of minutes before Flame finally picked up his fork and knife and began cutting into the fish in front of him, stabbing it with the fork and throwing it into his mouth. He had been excited to try food from this place; it had been hyped up so much after all with all of the tapestries, fancy dragons sitting around, and the fact the owner was able to just give Umber a hundred and fifty suns like it was nothing.

As soon as he bit into it, he could already tell that it was better than anything he could make. It was perfectly salty, with a strong fish flavor. It was definitely put into some sort of marinate — probably another secret recipe the restaurant had, if they had any secret recipe at all.

Maybe they're just naturally good cooks, Flame thought. *That or this Maelstrom guy has some sort of secret flavor-enhancing spice that he has*

them put on everything here.

"Umber, how did you get so lucky to get a free pass here?" Flame asked jokingly. "I mean, this food is better than my cooking!"

"You mean how did *you* get so lucky," Umber corrected. "Avalanche is the reason we're here in the first place, you know."

"I'll have to fly out there tomorrow to thank her or something," Flame said. Umber stifled a bit of a laugh at this. "What?" he asked.

"It's just that I knew you would say that!" Umber admitted with little laughs slipping through as he spoke.

"Well, it looks like you know me well, MudWing." Flame unconsciously picked up the glass of wine next to his plate and took a sip because he was getting thirsty.

He subtly spit the wine back into the glass immediately after tasting it, trying not to draw any more attention than he already has from everyone in the restaurant. He didn't want for someone to complain about them not having *proper etiquette* or some bullshit like that; it would definitely ruin Umber's plans.

"Delicious," Flame said sarcastically, being rewarded with a faint chuckle from Umber.

Umber then took out his fork and knife and began cutting a big portion of his steak, struggling a bit and sending the juices to flow out over the plate. From Flame's perspective, he could tell that it was nice and tender and looked to be a perfect medium-rare.

He stabbed the steak with his fork and threw it down his maw, and his eyes immediately lit up with glee. It was as if he had just eaten his first bite of meat in years — that definitely wasn't the case though. Umber would probably die before giving up meat for that long.

"This is even better than the breadsticks!" Umber said with excitement running through his voice.

"Yeah? And you've got some disgusting overpriced grape juice to

wash it all down," Flame joked.

"Oh, come on Flame," Umber scoffed. "It can't be *that* bad." He took a sip of his wine and immediately spit it back out into the glass, just like Flame had. He scrunched up his face a bit, which is something he rarely did since basically anything and everything he ate was good. "Nevermind, it's that bad."

He took his knife and began cutting into another slice of steak. That was until he completely gave up and took the whole piece of meat in his talons and chomped down on it, ripping a big chunk off before chewing and swallowing it.

Just an average MudWing at an average restaurant, Flame thought. Well, kind of average, but also really expensive. The prices on the menu were crazy! His single fish had cost 30 suns!

He habitually looked around once again and could see that the dragons around them were hardly even batting an eye; they probably didn't want to be on the other end of Flame's glare again. He had to agree though, it was pretty scary whenever he *really* wanted it to be.

Yeah, that's right, Flame thought. *Say something, I fucking dare you*.

Whether it was by instinct, or the fact he felt like he needed to make sure that Umber didn't feel embarrassed, he contradicted his thoughts earlier about never stooping down to a MudWing's level. He grabbed his piece of fish with his bare talons and took a big bite of it, just like Umber had.

He — once again — was met with the perfect flavor of the fish. All the way from the saltiness of the meat to the way it fell apart so easily was perfect, and he was just now realizing why Umber ate like this. Of course, he wasn't going to eat like this unironically; this was just a one time thing.

Maybe MudWings know something I don't after all, Flame thought.

He looked up at Umber with a smile and his talons covered in smooshed fish from gripping it too hard; he hadn't been accustomed

to the MudWing way of eating yet, but he was learning. Umber cracked a smile as well, taking another bite of the beef in his hand while keeping eye contact with Flame the whole time.

Before they knew it, both of their pieces of meat had been completely gone. Of course, Umber still had one more and he had the one-ounce tin of caviar he ordered. He heard that it was good alone though, so he wiped his talons on one of the napkins at the table, picked up the tiny spoon he was given with the tin, and scooped a little bit in his mouth.

The flavor was unique, but nothing special, and certainly *not* worth the twenty suns he paid for it. Well, technically *he* didn't pay for it, Maelstrom did.

"Was it good?" Umber asked.

"Meh," Flame admitted. "It's free though, so who cares."

"I guess you're right," Umber said. "I just don't want to take any more money from Maelstrom than we already have." His voice got a little low. "I mean, he seems like such a nice guy!"

"Umber, you're the only dragon in Pyrrhia that would feel bad about getting free food," Flame joked. "Besides, if he cared *so much* about the money, then he wouldn't have given us fifty more suns on top of the hundred from before!"

"Yeah, you're probably right," Umber sighed. "I think we should be getting home soon though." He gestured toward one of the windows, where the sky was beginning to darken and the sun was lowering under the horizon and the moons were beginning to shine.

Flame could tell that he was nervous though, and he knew why. It was because once they got home, Umber would have to tell him all about his dream, which was definitely going to be hard seeing his reaction to being woken up before.

"Hey, Umber," Flame said, grabbing Umber's attention who was still staring out of the window. "It's okay to be scared to tell me about...everything. If it's bothering you this much, I really think you

need to tell me."

Umber didn't turn away from the window and only gave a quiet "mhm" back. He looked down at his talons and could see that they were starting to get a little shaky, so he called the waiter over so that they could leave.

"Are you two ready to go?" the waitress asked.

"Y-Yeah," Flame stammered.

"Alright. Would you like a to-go box for that?" She nodded her head toward Umber's steak and pasta, which he would definitely want to eat right after their talk tonight.

"Oh- yes, thank you," Flame said politely.

"No problem. I'll be right back with your box," she said.

They sat there in silence for a minute, and Flame looked over at Umber's expression. He was obviously full of anxiety and nervousness right now, and he couldn't help but feel a little sorry. Whatever it was, it must have been something serious to get this kind of reaction out of him.

"Alright, here's your to-go box! Have a wonderful night," the waitress from before said, setting down two decently sized brown cardboard boxes that seemed like they could be shut securely without opening on the fly home.

Flame reached over the table and grabbed Umber's plate and knife, stabbing the piece of steak and throwing it into the box before snapping it shut, and dumping the pasta into the other one and doing the same. He stacked them both on top of each other and lifted them both up with both talons.

"Alright Umber, let's go," Flame said. Umber was obviously stuck in some sort of trance by the way he snapped his head over at him, before standing up and beginning to walk down the red carpet path.

Flame stood up and followed him through the restaurant and to the door, but something stopped them both in their tracks as they were

walking out. The NightWing at the door before had been gone, probably in the kitchen or something. That wasn't the odd thing though. There was a scavenger that seemed to have taken the opportunity of the NightWing leaving his post to sneak in and was on top of one of the tables that had a candle and red cloth over it by the door.

It looked to have long, brown hair that drooped past its shoulders, and onto its chest, with a raggedy shirt on, and its pants were just of just a piece of cloth that dangled from its torso, and it looked like it hadn't bathed in at least a week from all of the dirt plastered around its body.

How the fuck did a scavenger make it this far into the Sky Kingdom? Flame thought.

That's when the scavenger spotted their eyes gazing directly at them. With a jump, it quickly tried to flee, but it slipped on the cloth on the table, sending it to fall a couple of feet onto the floor to which they quickly recovered and ran straight through the door.

One thing that also fell alongside the scavenger though, was the candle on the table, which landed on the carpet and immediately made it begin to burn a bright orange, charring up in mere seconds.

Before they knew it, the fire had spread to even more of the carpet, raging into a large fire that blocked the front door and was already spreading to some of the wooden chairs and tables around, lighting menus on fire and burning the napkins up in an instant.

The fire was quickly creeping up on them both now, burning everything to a crisp as the seconds passed, like the fury of a gruesome death staring them dead in the eyes, daring them to try and leave.

Author's note: ;-;

Chapter 13

Umber's POV

Umber reflexively took a step back, falling backward and taking Flame with him as he tumbled to the ground watching the containers of food fall through the air. They hit the ground with a *splat* causing them to spill whatever was in them. Everything had already happened so fast — from the fire starting, all the way to it nearing them happened in only a split second.

He could smell the burning in the air now, and it smelled like someone had put noodles into a pot with no water, and lit them up until they charred. It quickly began making Umber sick to his stomach, but he hardly cared right now.

By now, dragons had realized what was happening and quickly stood up and started running around and screaming, leaving their expensive meals behind through their panic — they probably forgot about them completely. That's what Umber did as soon as *he* saw the fire anyways.

As Umber looked around, he realized that this whole place was covered in this red carpet and the fire would surely reach them before he could think of where to go. His mind subconsciously began analyzing all of the routes they could run to, but he couldn't find any in time. So his mind went to the next best thing, and that was to think of a way to avoid it entirely.

With one quick motion, he dug his talons into the rug and slid them across, making a clean incision. He dug both of his talons under the fabric and ripped it up as hard as he could while ignoring the resistance it gave; his adrenaline had already kicked in and gave him the strength he needed to do it effortlessly.

That should give us enough time to escape! Umber hoped.

He quickly staggered up, almost tripping himself again in his panic.

He frantically grabbed Flame's talons and pulled him up, who also stumbled over himself for a few seconds before finally getting his balance.

"Holy fucking shit!" Flame yelled, his voice shaky and obviously panicked. "Where do we go?!"

"I-I don't know!" Umber responded in an equally panicked voice, already beginning to look around for an exit. "The kitchen! There's probably an exit through the kitchen!"

The door had been on the opposite side of the restaurant and dragons were running around in a panic. Most of them probably hadn't even realized that they could leave through the kitchen, so they were just kind of scouring in fear on the other side of the room, staring at the blocked-off door.

Some were trying to exit through the windows, breaking them and then wiping them clean of glass before trying to fit their whole body through it. Most of them failed, where some of the smaller, skinnier dragons barely got through, like the dragonets. An adult dragon had no chance of escaping the same way. Obviously, neither Umber nor Flame could escape through the window either; he could tell just by looking at the size of each square.

He began trying to run through the restaurant with Flame's talons still in his, but instead just kept getting knocked over and trampled by all of the other dragons. This went on for at least a minute, where dragons finally realized that they could leave through the kitchen and began piling up at the door, escaping one at a time.

Unfortunately, Flame and Umber were both stuck at the back of the "line" and the fire had already made significant progress, setting the roof on fire and burning the support beams at the top which surely couldn't be a good thing for anyone who was still stuck in the building, including them.

Umber could feel his heart banging against his chest right now, feeling like it was trying to claw its way out with sheer force. He could feel his legs beginning to get weak which made him exhausted and every second more in this restaurant that much more

unbearable.

The air was beginning to get hot and began giving Umber a headache. The screaming and yelling of the dragons around him wasn't helping either and he put his talons on his head from the pain.

"Fucking move already!" Flame frantically yelled. It sounded more like a beg than it did a demand though, which wasn't very surprising judging by the situation they were in right now.

That's when Umber heard some sort of loud cracking sound, followed by a loud bang that shook the whole restaurant and dragons flying back screaming, knocking them both backward. Once he recovered from the sudden noise, he looked ahead and could see that one of the support beams had already been burned enough to collapse, falling in the middle of the crowd. Thankfully, everybody had gotten out of the way in time. But the fact that one of the beams had already collapsed meant that the wood had to have been mostly air on the inside.

I guess I know where their priorities are then! Umber thought.

Finally, dragons were beginning to get through the door and the crowd was beginning to get smaller — the fire on the other talon was only getting bigger. Thankfully, Umber ripping the carpet had opened enough of a gap so that the fire couldn't spread as quickly near where they were, since there was only carpet where there wasn't a table which created rows in between. The other row though, was almost completely burned up and was beginning to spread to the interior wall which was made of wood — something Umber hadn't noticed until now since it was painted a similar black to the bricks outside.

They took a quick leap over the fallen beam, being careful to jump over it a good distance since it was still on fire on the top. Thankfully, it hadn't burned the carpet in their row enough for it to set fire, but it was definitely a hazard regardless. Actually, this whole place was a hazard! How could they not have had anything to prevent something like this?! I mean, they didn't even use half-decent wood for the walls!

They were halfway to the door now, and Umber could see that the fire was spreading up the walls on the outside of the kitchen door and the air was beginning to get even hotter than before, only making Umber's headache worse.

Finally, they neared the front of the line and Flame began shoving past all of the dragons, and Umber began hearing the top of the frame splinter and crack. Obviously Flame heard it too, because he began pushing past the dragons even more than before. They just kept getting pushed to the back of the line though, so the only thing they could do was pray to the moons that the sounds were enough motivation to hurry.

The splinters and cracks were only becoming more frequent as the seconds passed until they finally made it to the front and Flame went to leave through the door. That was until Umber saw the top of the doorframe do something he was dreading seeing: collapse.

He wasn't going to let Flame die in here though; not like he did Crane. So almost like a reflex, he lunged forward and pushed Flame through the doorway right as it collapsed, sending him a little bit under the rubble before he quickly pulled his way out. Looking around, the doorway was on fire with a row of flames following it, which made it a less-than-desirable way to leave. He was trapped.

No more miracles, no more luck, Umber thought. *It's my turn to save someone for once*.

"Umber! What did you just do?!" Flame screamed from the other side of the collapsed door, staggering up and putting his snout as close as he could to the pile.

"Saving you, Flame! I'm done having my life saved over and over again! It's *my* turn to save someone this time," Umber said.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Flame said, panicked as he tried to push through the pile of wood but eventually gave up once he realized it wasn't going to budge. "Stay calm, I'm going to get help! I'm going to get you out of here!" He turned away and began to run.

"Don't bother," Umber called out lowly, making Flame stop in his tracks. "You'll just end up getting yourself killed. This whole building will already be on fire once you find someone."

"Don't say that!" Flame said. "I'm going to get someone, and I'm going to get you out of here. *Alive*."

Umber was about to say something along the lines of "Please just leave me" or "I don't want you getting hurt", but he already heard the clacking of Flame's talons against the tiled floor as he sprinted.

He backed up from the door and made his way over to the end of the row and over to the table they were sitting at before, which was still intact since this row of carpet was yet to set fire; it would soon though, and Flame's path would be blocked.

Maybe they'll stop him from coming. Maybe nobody will want to come in with him and he'll realize that there's nothing he can do. Maybe once he sees my...my body, he'll leave, Umber thought, wincing at the last few words.

He was definitely scared though. I mean, who wouldn't be? He had survived a war for his whole life, but was about to be killed by some lousy fire! But, there was nothing he, or anybody else could do now except wait for someone to put it out and recover his body for the closed casket funeral that Flame would definitely buy.

He sat down at their table, staring blankly into space and clasping his shaky talons together, expressionless as he began shuffling through all of his memories with his sibs like a deck of cards — or at least the best ones he could remember in the face of death.

One memory that immediately came to him (and one he thoroughly enjoyed) was the time when they had all gone out flying, and Pheasant jumped onto his back and forced him to land while holding her weight. Sure, this was a little mean, but Umber knew that she was only messing with him and that he'd get her back sometime.

"*Hey! Get off!" Umber demanded as Pheasant landed on his back.*

"Come on Umber!" Pheasant yelled. "You can do it! I believe in you! Just land in that field over there and I'll get off," she laughed, flicking her tail to the field in the distance.

It didn't help that they were over a large lake either, so he had to fly across the whole thing to the field that Pheasant was talking about. Him being the smallest of the group, he could already feel his wings begin to falter, making them droop lower and lower as the seconds passed.

Her talons were firmly grasped onto Umber's shoulders and he knew that there was no getting her off unless he plunged them both into the water, which was something he was thinking about doing the whole time. He didn't want to hurt Pheasant though; that wasn't his goal.

"Umber, just straighten your wings and stiffen your back!" Crane yelled as she flew steadily beside him. "If you do that, her weight will be much easier to carry!"

And he did just that. He straightened his wings as much as he possibly could, and tried making his back as stiff as a rock. Suddenly, she was marginally easier to carry; it was more exhausting though.

He began flapping his wings as hard as he could and he could tell that they weren't drooping down nearly as much as before. He could feel the burning in his wings with each flap as they neared the edge of the lake.

"Alright, that's enough," Reed said. "Umber obviously can't hold you up, Pheasant. It's time to stop."

"Yeah, c'mon Pheasant! This isn't funny anymore," Marsh said.

These words only made him want to continue pushing forward, giving him a strange sense of extreme motivation with each flap of his wings and beat of his heart, just like the rushing of a river whenever he would try to swim upstream to catch a fish. Not the smartest idea, but anything's possible when you're hungry — which was basically all the time.

He could feel Pheasant's grip begin to loosen, but he was going to prove to them all that he wasn't "weak little Umber who couldn't even hold a dragon's weight".

"No, it's fine," Umber assured. "I can do it." Her grip tightened again, firmly grasping his shoulders as he flew.

These words caught everyone off guard and he could see it on their faces as he slowly descended toward the ground, struggling a bit under her weight. Until finally, he felt his talons dig into the grass as he fell over so that her weight didn't actually crush him, panting all the while. She fell over with an "Ack!" and quickly got up. The others eventually landed beside him, who were trailing him the whole way to make sure he didn't get hurt.

"You did it, Umber!" Crane said cheerfully. "Wow, I really didn't expect for you to actually land with her on your back! It looked like a lion riding a scavenger from our perspective!"

"Oh- thanks Crane," Umber said with a mix between a laugh and a pant. "I didn't think I could do it either, but your advice helped! If it wasn't for you I'd probably be wishing I was a SeaWing right about now."

But his sibs weren't here to give him advice, and they weren't here to save him either. He snapped back to reality by the hisses and crackles of the flames smoldering around him; the heat pulsing against his scales as if he had gotten too close to a bonfire and the sounds of dragons' screams and cries outside: including Flame's. He couldn't make out exactly what he was yelling though, so he strained his ears to try and hear what he was saying but still couldn't hear over the fire's screams.

Nobody else needs to get hurt, Umber thought. I just hope Flame realizes that before it's too late.

Just like when right before Crane saved him though, he didn't want to go out scared; no, he wanted to go out thinking of all of the happiest memories with his family and friends, so he kept digging through his memory like a groundhog desperately tunneling through the dirt in anticipation for winter. Finally, though, his mind landed on a memory of him and Flame back in the Healing Center, only a little while after they started dating.

"Umber," Sora said, breaking the long silence. "Do you want to go and gather some more herbs tomo-"

She was cut off by the familiar rhythm of talons banging against the door. One, pause, two, pause, three. Just by his knock though, Umber could already tell it was Flame, and he felt a bubbly excited feeling in his chest — he hadn't seen him all day today.

"Oh! That must be Flame!" Umber exclaimed, leaping to his talons and running to the door. "Also, yes!" he answered, being rewarded with a smile from Sora.

He turned the handle, and low and behold it was in fact, Flame. His red scales were shining from the candlelight in their room and he had a big smile curved around his face, looking happier than ever just from seeing Umber. This wasn't a surprise though because he already knew how much Flame loved him.

"Hey, Umber," Flame said awkwardly. "Do you want to come over to my room tonight? Or..."

"Yes!" Umber interrupted before turning around and throwing a "Will you be okay?" glare at Sora, to which she gave a nod with a smile.

He turned back to Flame and they began walking through the halls, slowly making their way to his room. They had to walk outside to get to Flame's building since they somehow still weren't placed in the same one. Until finally, Flame stopped at his door and twisted the handle. To Umber's surprise though, the room was extremely clean; the table was wiped off, the floor had been swept, and his bed was made almost perfectly.

"Oh- you cleaned your room!" Umber said with a bit of surprise.

"Yep, just for this," Flame said proudly. "I've been in the kitchen all day, so I haven't had much time to do anything. They kept telling me to do a bunch of shit that was either entirely pointless or someone else could've easily done."

"Why didn't you ask me to help?" Umber said in an obviously offended tone.

"Calm down, MudWing," Flame said. "I thought you needed a day to yourself. It's not easy to deal with me sometimes."

At this point, they were already in the room so that nobody could hear their conversation, and Flame closed the door behind them.

"Flame, I'll always be able to deal with you," Umber said with a scoff.

There was a silence between them for a few moments as they stared into each other's eyes, unsure of what to do next. They hadn't been dating for too long now and it didn't help that they were both pretty new to this whole "being together" thing.

Flame made the first move though, inching his face closer to Umber with a light smile until he could feel his hot breath.

Umber could feel his heart rate begin to pick up, and his breaths got shorter as well. He began mimicking Flame's movements until their snouts were only centimeters apart, and Umber opened his mouth and tilted his head and felt a wave of relief fall over him as their mouths met.

Flame pushed them both onto his bed without stopping, and Umber had so many emotions going through him at this moment which all gave him the urge to keep going.

They did this for at least an hour, giving themselves a couple minute long breather every now and again, before falling asleep in each other's arms.

I'll never kiss Flame again, Umber thought with an aching realization, snapping back to reality once again and tears beginning to fall down his face. *and he'll never kiss me again, either. But I did it though, I finally made up my debt to Crane.*

His talons were still shaking in anticipation of the painful death he awaited with tears dripping onto the table. He looked back and could see that his row of carpet was finally beginning to catch fire, spreading to the pile of wood in the doorway.

Goodbye, Flame, Umber thought. He hoped he'd never have to think or say these words, but here he is, trapped in a building with his last moments being without Flame.

That's when he heard something above him begin to crack and fall, sounding extremely similar to the beam that had fallen before. He

fought the urge to look up though because that wouldn't do anything except make him even more scared than he already was, so he sat in the same position as before, anticipating the impact.

The flaming beam above him finally gave way though, hitting him in the head and causing him to fall out of the chair, unconscious, making him crash down onto the floor, pinning his body beneath its scorching grasp.

Flame's POV

As Flame desperately ran through the empty kitchen looking for an exit, he could still hear the crackling of the fire inside, his heart pounding faster and faster every second he wasn't in there with Umber protecting him. He wished that he could spread his wings all around his body and take all of the splinters, burns, and scars that he possibly could until his body gave out, just so that Umber had a chance of escaping.

Just wait, Umber, Flame thought. *I'm going to get you out of there, even if I have to die trying.*

He soon found the door outside and ran straight through it. It was a wooden door, similar to the ones inside the building except it had a clear sign on the other side reading "KITCHEN. DO NOT ENTER" in big red letters.

As he looked out at the road, he could see that there was a massive crowd of dragons watching the building burn, completely unaware that there was still someone stuck inside with no way out, and that dragon just so happened to be one of the most important dragons in Flame's life.

Most of them looked fine, but a few had a couple of slight burns from the look of it, not to mention the smoke inhalation many of them have probably suffered from already. Most of these dragons probably deserved it anyways if they were anything like that SkyWing that clawed Umber's face!

He immediately ran over to the crowd and most of them were completely ignoring his existence and instead were entirely focused

on the building; no "Are you OK?" or "Are you hurt?", just completely fucking ignoring him.

He could already feel the anger boiling inside him; not because they were ignoring *him,* but because ignoring him meant they were ignoring Umber as well. But he wasn't going to let it show because right now — for once in his life — being angry wasn't the solution.

"I some fucking help over here!" he frantically screamed, immediately getting the attention of a few dragons. Most of them were still staring at the fire which only made him more angry. "My boyfriend is still in there!" He pointed his talons toward the building.

As he anticipated a response, he could feel himself begin to panic even more at the thought of losing Umber, his breaths beginning to get short and quick and he started getting lightheaded and he could feel tears begin to fall down his face as his hope slowly faded into darkness. But these were the least of his problems right now; he had to save Umber, no matter the cost.

C'mon Umber. Please, just hang in there a little longer. Just until I can find someone to help me get you out, Flame prayed.

Nobody responded to him though and they just looked away back at the fire, not even giving a shit that there was a dragon in there that would be burned alive if nobody helped!

Wait, that NightWing! Surely he'll help! Flame thought. *He seemed to care so much when Umber first came in! He has to at least care about him a little!*

He looked around though but didn't see any black scales in the crowd. They would stick out, too, so there's no way that Flame could miss him; he just kept running around though, looking for him just in case he skimmed over him somehow. After a couple tried at finding him, he couldn't see anyone and gave up.

What he did see was a group of SkyWings along with a few IceWings flying toward them who all had some sort of white fabric strapped tightly all the way around their neck, which had a giant

red "+" on it. He guessed that they had to be here to help put out the fire and help the injured.

They'll help me! Flame thought with a bit of hope sparking inside of him again. *They have to! They can't just ignore Umber's existence! Please...please help!* he begged.

As the medics landed, he ran over to them as fast as he could. The IceWings immediately split off from the group and got into formation to begin putting out the fire.

"Hey!" Flame called out as he ran, fear shivering through his voice. "My boyfriend is still in there! He's trapped!"

He looked around at the SkyWings' faces and saw a bit of remorse trickle down their scales. Nobody seemed to be moving a muscle though; not one. His stomach felt like it was being twisted into knots, over and over and over again until the pain was too unbearable to stay quiet. He shifted his scales restlessly with uncomfortability conjuring up a response just in case they couldn't quite hear him.

"Did any of you fucking hear me?!" Flame screamed. "He's trapped in-"

"I'm sorry," one of the SkyWings near the front interrupted. "There's nothing we can do. The fire's already too out of control and if *he is* still in there, it's...it's probably too late for him."

These words shot through his whole body like being bitten by a dragonbite viper, except it didn't only bite once; it bit as many times as it possibly could, constantly pushing its venom through his veins and slowly killing you from the inside out. But he wasn't going to give up yet. With or without these dragons' help, he was going to go inside to save Umber, death sentence or not — he was still at least a little afraid of running straight into fire though, which was understandable.

If he is still alive, the back of his mind whispered. *NO! HE IS STILL ALIVE!* he retorted. *HE'S STILL IN THERE, PROBABLY WAITING FOR ME BY THE DOOR!*

He could already see the scene playing out in his head: Umber would still be standing right by the door waiting for him, and Flame would break through the fallen wood and rescue him, then they would go home and Flame would hold him as tight as he possibly could in his wings and they would never go back to another restaurant in their whole life.

I'll just make him food from now on! Flame thought. *We'll never have to go to another restaurant again, and Umber will never, ever, get hurt!*

No matter how many times he denied it though, the image of Umber's corpse kept flashing through his mind a million times, ignoring his demands for them to stop. He couldn't take this anymore! He had to go inside, and nobody was going to stop him!

He couldn't imagine living a life without Umber. Even though he had only known him for two years, it felt like a lifetime. Umber was the dragon that had finally brought some meaning to his life and drowned out all of the hatred he had, and he wasn't going to let a few stupid fucking SkyWings stop him from saving him, either.

Fuck this. If they won't go in with me, then I'm going in by myself, Flame thought.

Without a second thought, he bolted toward the kitchen door but soon felt something grab his tail, then something else grab his body, then something else grab his neck until he could hardly even move. He looked around and could see a flurry of red scales all around him — they must be the culprits.

"Get the...FUCK OFF ME," Flame screamed at them, choking on his words a bit as dread ran through his veins.

"Sir, we cannot let you go inside of that building!" a different SkyWing said.

"I don't necessarily give a shit! Let go of me!" Flame protested.

"I'm sorry," the SkyWing from before said, trying to de-escalate the situation, who was also the one who initially grabbed his tail. "He's already gone. You have my condolences."

Hearing these words sent rage shooting through him like never before, so he took his talons and conjured up as much adrenaline-fueled strength as he could. As quick as lightning, he scratched the dragon's face who was holding onto his neck and it immediately sent him flying back, releasing his grip on Flame.

The other SkyWings started using even more force to try and pin him down, but he wasn't going to be stopped from saving Umber — he couldn't live with himself if he was. So he built as much fire as he could in the back of his throat and steered his head around just to make sure that they could all hear the noisy hissing coming from his mouth.

"I SAID, GET THE FUCK OFF ME!" Flame yelled, sending shivers running down even his spine — he didn't know he was even capable of yelling like he used to, but it was for an important reason.

They all let go of him in almost an instant, throwing their talons in front of them and slowly retreating backward.

"Hey!" one of them said in fear. "We-we're just trying to help! If you go in there, you'll surely be killed!"

"I don't care!" Flame responded before breaking into a sprint, leaving them behind in a cloud of dust.

He ran as fast as his legs could possibly take him, feeling weak as if he was overdosing on adrenaline at this very moment.

But within a few heartbeats, he was at the door and he slammed through it with all of his might, breaking it off of the hinges from trying to bend it the wrong way. He didn't have time to open the door normally though. Umber didn't have time for him to open the door normally.

Running through the kitchen at lightning speed, he retraced his steps all the way back into the door, slamming into things at every turn from the pure speed he was running. Once, he almost sent a pot of still boiling oil off of the stove and onto his scales, but dodged out of the way just in time and only got a few drops of the scorching liquid on himself — which he hardly felt.

He made it to the collapsed door, panting restlessly from all of the stress and anxiety that was running through him.

"UMBER? UMBER ARE YOU IN HERE?" he yelled. He waited a couple of seconds for a response but never got one. "I'M GETTING YOU OUT OF HERE! I JUST HAVE TO BREAK THROUGH THIS DAMN DOOR!"

He began slamming his body at the planks, harder and harder as his body wouldn't let him at full strength at first. But he kept slamming into it for what felt like an eternity, before the wood finally gave way and fell forward, like a tsunami of planks.

He looked forward and could see that the carpet was on fire and was slowly creeping down the row, but he couldn't see Umber anywhere in here. Maybe it was just his scales that blended him in with the wood? Or maybe he escaped through a window somehow? Regardless though, he began running directly through the fire, burning his paws and sending a singeing pain up his legs as he did. He ignored the excruciating burning though and kept moving forward, the only thing on his mind being Umber.

Once he got past, he looked forward at the two fallen beams: one right in front of him — which was the one they jumped over before — and another one right by their table. One thing was odd though because laying under the beam was Umber's body, completely still.

"Holy fucking shit!" Flame reflexively said before running over to him and attempting to push the beam off.

The wooden beam was still on fire, so he ended up burning his talons even more than he already had, but he still didn't care; as long as Umber lived, he would be okay, dead or alive.

He got the beam off and now he could see Umber clear as day. He was laying on his back with one of his wings sprawled out, and the other one was bent in the completely wrong direction, definitely broken. His scales had melted around his side, back, neck, and back left leg, leaving them to be a charred mess.

I'm too late... Flame thought with heart-aching dread. *No! I can still*

save him! I just have to get him out of this room!

He latched onto Umber's back legs — being careful to avoid his burn spot, of course — and began trying to drag him through the building. He couldn't though; Umber was way too heavy for him to drag all by himself, but he kept trying. He was never going to give up on him.

There was still one issue though: the row of carpet was still on fire and there was no way Flame would be able to carry him over it, while simultaneously getting his paws and legs burnt to a crisp — which he would gladly do for him, he just didn't think his body would physically allow him to continue carrying Umber through all of that pain.

So what he did instead was let go of his legs and lay down next to him, hugging him close and wrapping his wing around him as tight as possible and waited for the fire to inevitably kill them both. If Umber was going to die, he was going to go right along with him.

"I'm so sorry, Umber," Flame whispered with tears upon tears rolling down his face, making him lay there in a whimper. "I couldn't save you in time. But don't worry, I'm coming with you."

Author's note: I- uh...did not expect for this to be so difficult to write, but I don't know what I was really expecting. One thing I'm going to say before painfully starting the next chapter is that I also very often text in the r/wof discord writing channel (/invite/WingsOfFire) and *sometimes* post leaks of some of my new chapters if you're interested. I keep them in spoilers though so that if there is the off chance that someone does read my story there, they don't get flashbanged with spoilers.

Chapter 14

Turvar's POV

The sunset was beautiful today; the colors reflected perfectly off of the distant houses as he flew, surveying the area of something he could do to help — which is something he did often. He'd been even more inclined to help dragons after yesterday — after that SkyWing attacked that MudWing.

What a psycho, Turvar thought. *Why can't we all just get along? Why do so many dragons hate other dragons simply because of who they are?*

He replayed the scene in his head, going through how he had just stood there and watched for the first couple of seconds, all until the moment when he saw his claws raise in the air and swipe across the MudWing's cheek. He swore he could see a moment of hesitation fly across that MudWing's face; like he could have dodged out of the way in time, or grabbed his talons, or something like that. But he didn't for some reason, which he found odd.

If he had nearly the reaction time of that MudWing, and the skills to be able to do anything like that, he would've thrown that SkyWing into the gravel and then sent him to the dungeons for even attempting to attack a prince like that — or at least send him to Ruby and see what she thought of the whole incident; he didn't want to draw any unnecessary attention to himself.

Thankfully though, that SkyWing has paid the price and is now sitting comfortably in the dungeons for a while until Ruby feels that he's learned his lesson.

What he was more worried about in that situation though — more than what happened to that MudWing and his SkyWing boyfriend after he got home — was what that MudWing thought of him. Did he think of him as heroic? Stupid to get involved? An excuse for a prince? Or maybe he even thought of him as a disgrace to Ruby's honor.

Every interaction that he musters up the strength to talk, these thoughts fly throughout his mind, millions at a time and he doesn't have the answers to any of them. It's not like he can just go up to a dragon and ask them; that would be awkward and then they would probably think even less of him than they already did. I mean, he's a prince and can't even have a normal conversation without second-guessing everything he said after stuttering over every word for moons sake!

This is too overwhelming and exhausting to think about right now, he thought. *I'm going to search for a few more minutes, then I'm going back to the palace and going to sleep.* And then wake up and do this all over again, occasionally getting something to eat from a stall that nobody else was at, regardless if the food was bad or not; it was better than having to make small talk with anyone except the vendor and having to explain his eyepatch all over again.

Except, while he was looking around he picked up the faint scent of burning wood. Normally, this wouldn't be unordinary to him because of all of the grills near the outside of town; but he was high in the air, which could only mean one thing: something big was on fire.

He shot his head up and looked around in a panic, looking out for any smoke that might be in the distance. And sure enough, he saw a massive cloud of smoke billowing out of a building across the town.

Uh oh, he thought. *Is anyone hurt? Does anyone need help? Is anyone still trapped in there? Do the medics know yet? How did it start?* Right now though, he didn't have the time to answer these questions himself; he had to get to that building and make sure everyone was alright, regardless if he gets hurt or not.

I have this, after all. He rubbed a small gem embedded in his scales right above his front right talon. It was bright red and almost perfectly matched his scales, making it invisible to anyone briefly staring him down.

It had been a gift from Ruby the day that she adopted him from the streets of the Sky Kingdom. Sure, it hurt like hell getting it put in, but it was worth it in the end because it would keep him safe from

just about anything.

Without hesitation, he began beating his wings as hard as he could, flying through the air at what he thought was close to the speed of sound. As he got closer to the fire, he could see that there were many dragons outside. Thankfully, the medics seemed to already be there and IceWings were getting in formation to put the fire out.

He looked down at the medics to see if they were treating anyone and sure enough, they were. As he looked closer though, he noticed something odd.

They're treating...another medic? Turvar thought, looking at the large gash on his cheek. *How'd that happen? Is he okay? Did another dragon do that to him? Was it by accident or on purpose? How long ago did it happen? Is it still bleeding?*

He swooped down, landing on the path and breaking into a sprint toward the medics to hopefully gather some information about any dragons still inside. As he got closer, he could see that the scratch was definitely still bleeding a lot, meaning that it had to have just happened.

"H-Hey!" he called out. The medics flipped their heads around and began staring at him, which made him want to run away and hide from them. He couldn't though; dragons still possibly needed to be saved. "I-Is anyone st-still inside?"

"Uhm- two dragons I think?" one of the medics inspecting the cut said. "One of them went crazy and ran back inside though!"

Two dragons? That can't be good, he thought. A*re they still okay? Are they alive? Are they stuck? How hot is it-,* he cut his thoughts off. *No, Turvar. Stop asking questions! There are two dragons still inside that building that might need your help!*

He began running toward the building, but he heard one of the medics begin to scream at him that not only made him jump but also worried about what he thought about him for deciding to run in.

"Hey! You can't go inside!" one of the medics yelled. "I'm not losing anyone else because of your stupidity! I mean, do you see that fire?!" he flicked his tail at the blaze. "That place is already lit up like a bonfire! Did you know that burning to death is the most painful way to die?!"

He thought about this for a moment, going through all of the possibilities of things that could happen. Weighing the pros and cons, he ultimately decided that he didn't care what that dragon thought, and the lives of two dragons are far more important than his.

Besides, this will keep me safe, he thought once again, rubbing the gem on his leg.

"I-I'm going in," Turvar said sternly. "I-If you have a problem with that, g-go complain to Queen Ruby."

He didn't think that they'd actually take him seriously though, judging by the way he stumbled over just about every word in that sentence. Regardless, he was going to go into this building whether the medic liked it or not.

He broke into a sprint, heading toward the front door. He tried to push it open, but it wouldn't budge no matter how hard he pushed — it must be blocked from the other side.

Looking around, he moved backward slightly because the heat emanating from the scorching inferno was making him uncomfortable; it was like staring down a pool of lava, challenging it to try and kill you even though it very obviously could.

Don't most of these fancy restaurants have doors that lead directly to the kitchen? he thought. *This one MUST have something similar!* He looked across the front wall, but he didn't see any kind of door, so he ran over to the left side of the building, hoping — praying that there was another way in over there.

He turned the corner and could clearly see that there was some sort of hole in the wall, spewing out bright orange light onto the ground. It was getting dark outside, which made it extremely easy

to see against the shadow plastered on the grass.

That's it! he realized.

He ran toward the door, kicking up grass with every desperate step. Once he got in front of it, he was instantly pushed away by the uncomfortable heatwave that spread around his scales and his eyes. He reflexively put his talons up in front of his face to cover most of the heat while he adjusted to the temperatures he was about to have to endure for the next (hopefully) few minutes.

As soon as he could, he took his first step inside and realized that the door that was there before had been ripped straight off of the hinges. He felt the heat all around him, along with the smell of burning wood filling the air even more prominently than it had been previously. There was thick, black smoke all around, coating the top of the ceiling and throwing ash everywhere, which was something he wished he knew before — it would take weeks to get it out from in between his scales.

Looking around, he realized that just about every wall in this kitchen was on fire right now, along with a few patches on the floor that he had to avoid as he slithered his way through. It took him a little while to find the door to the main restaurant because the kitchen was so complex and big; he did find it rather quickly though because of a few lucky guesses.

The main room was even worse than the kitchen; chairs were on fire, and the floor was almost completely engulfed in flames and was blocking his path, leaving him stuck at the doorway. Every wall was on fire, and even some of the beams had collapsed. Whatever two dragons were in here right now had to both either be seriously injured or dead which made him shiver a bit.

Just the thought of finding a dead dragon's body completely burned made him want to gag, but he pushed that thought aside and tried to focus on finding whoever was in here first.

That's when he spotted something he wondered how he didn't spot before: a SkyWing whimpering, who was laying down with his wing wrapped around something that had a few specks of black and

brown around it. That wasn't the worst part though. His talons seemed to be completely burned to the point where Turvar was wondering how he wasn't screaming in pain right now.

As he looked closer at the thing under the SkyWing's wing though, he realized that it was another dragon. Not just any other dragon though; he recognized his face. It was that MudWing from yesterday, his scales charred and burned, and he looked...he looked dead.

No, no, no, no! his mind screamed. *I'm too late!*

His mind flickered back to their first conversation though, where he mentioned that SkyWing's name accidentally.

Flame? Is that his name? If it really is the same MudWing, then it must be! he thought. Though, he was still really hoping that it wasn't.

"F-Flame?" Turvar called out.

To his horror, the SkyWing quickly flicked his head up and around to where Turvar was standing, tears falling down his eyes as he clutched the MudWing, close; close enough to as if he would disappear if he let go for even a second.

"Wh- who the fuck are you?" Flame said, wiping tears from his scales. His expression looked so scared, broken, and sad all at the same time; like he was a husk of a dragon.

"I'm T-Turvar- uh nevermind actually, that d-doesn't matter right n-now," Turvar said. "I'm going to get you b-both out of here, alright? Just- stay still!"

Flame didn't seem to second guess it though, he just buried his head back into the MudWing. He didn't say "Just save yourself!" or "Leave us here and escape with your life!" or "Go back to being the horrible Prince you are and let us die!" He wasn't going to do that no matter what he said though — he came in here to do exactly this.

Turvar didn't often like using the gem's power in front of other dragons because he didn't want even more attention on him than he already had. That was unless he either needed to defend himself or

had to practice, which he only did in front of guards who knew about it (which weren't many). But he knew that he couldn't just run through the fire and get them both out alive. He also knew that there wasn't enough time to get a fire extinguisher, or one of the IceWings outside and get them to put it out themselves.

This was the only way he would be able to save them.

It's now or never, he thought. *Time to finally put this gem to good use.*

Just like he had practiced when he had the gem first embedded into his scales, he closed his eyes and took deep, calming breaths, and tried to clear out everything around him. He focused on the heat against his scales, the air in his lungs, the crackles of the fire that slightly shook the floor under his talons, and tried to drown out every noise around him until he was in his own world that he could freely build; until finally, everything around him went blank and he was alone.

He imagined the chairs, the walls, the carpet, the ceiling, Flame and the MudWing lying on the floor, and most importantly, the wall of fire separating them. He imagined punching a hole through the air in front of him hard enough to make it shatter like a sheet of glass, sending the shards flying in every direction fast enough to break through even the scales of a MudWing.

Please, please work!

With a stomp of his right talon, he felt a jolt of energy rush up his arm starting from the gem, through his heart, down his spine, and to the tip of his tail. The feeling was sudden; it was something he had never felt before and it made him gasp — he hadn't used it at anywhere near this level of power when practicing. Within just a fraction of a second, he heard a loud crack shoot through the air, sounding like a book being dropped perfectly flat on its cover from the top of a staircase, followed by a giant gust of wind that smacked him across the snout.

When he first stomped his talons down, he held his breath, expecting for nothing to happen because creating a shockwave with his mind was a pretty foreign thing to him. But when his eyes shot

open from the deafening sound, he could clearly see that a path between him and the couple had been formed through the fire. The look on Flame's face was startled, to say the least.

"What the fuck was that?!" Flame asked as he covered his face to protect himself from the wind.

"I-I'll explain later," Turvar quickly said, rushing through the charred pathway and over to Flame. "Help me c-carry him!"

Flame quickly furled his wing back in and stood up, revealing the extent of the MudWing's burns. So many of his scales had been completely charred and they looked like they could flake off like ash. His wing was forced in the completely wrong direction and just the sight of it made him wince and want to close his eyes and never open them again. The smell smacked him in the face and immediately made him sick to his stomach and only added to his temptations.

"I'll grab one arm, you grab the other, alright?" Flame said, latching onto the MudWing's right talon. "We'll both drag him."

He didn't need to be told twice; he wanted to get out of here just as much as Flame did with his boyfriend. He grabbed his other talon and began dragging him across the floor as hard as he could. For the first few seconds, he didn't think that they would be able to do it, but Flame just kept pulling harder and harder, motivating him to do so as well.

They got to the kitchen and he noticed that it was far worse than it was before; there were more splotches of fire on the floor, looking like someone had dumped random puddles of oil everywhere and lit them up, the fire on the walls had spread to the ceiling and slowly began eating away at it, and the heat in here was beginning to get much greater than in the main room — the walls were much closer together and the fire was burning brighter here.

"C'mon Umber, just a little further, alright?" Flame whispered reassuringly. "Don't you dare fucking die on me! Not now!" His voice was full of desperation and he sounded inches away from another breakdown.

He couldn't imagine what he'd do in this situation: the dragon he loved most, stuck under a beam and having their scales scorched to a crisp and there was nothing you could do about it except stand there and watch it happen.

As they dragged Umber, Turvar kept hearing some sort of creaking and snapping sounds. At first, he thought it was nothing — he hoped it was nothing. But as the seconds ran by the sound only got more and more intense until he heard what sounded like a thick piece of wood snapping. He looked up just in time to see one of the wooden beams snap off of the roof and barrel toward them, showing no signs of slowing down.

In any other situation, he'd dodge out of the way, but he couldn't just let Flame and Umber both get crushed by this massive beam while he got to escape with his life. That wasn't fair! I mean, Flame had run in here, singed his talons to the point where he was sure that there would be some sort of permanent scarring, and then planned on lying down next to Umber until they were both killed because of what he assumed was him not being able to get them both out alive!

He had to do something, and he knew it. He had to conjure up a blast powerful enough to blow this beam away, but time was running thin and he didn't have nearly enough focus to do that. His heart was beating through his chest and his talons were already shaking to the point where he was beginning to lose his grip on Umber.

I have to try! he thought. *I can't just let them die!*

So instead of trying to clear his mind, he skipped straight to the part where he'd close his eyes and imagine himself punching a hole straight through the air above them as hard as he could — even harder than before. With little hope though, he braced for impact and prayed that it wouldn't be enough to kill them. Maybe all three of them would be able to cushion the impact enough to survive?

But with one last attempt to save them, he let go of Umber and stomped his talons down as hard as he possibly could, making the surrounding cooking equipment shake and rattle. That's when he

felt the feeling he was expecting to feel last: that jolt of energy that ran through his whole body and shook him to the core. It was even more intense than last time and he heard an even louder crack zip through the air; one loud enough to make even his ears ring.

As he recovered from the sudden rush, he opened his eyes and watched the beam shoot through the air at a surprisingly high speed, ricochet off of the ceiling, and land somewhere behind them, smashing into some of the metal stoves and deep fryers.

The beam had put a large dent in the steel; one big enough to make him stand there and wonder what it would've done if the gem hadn't worked and the beam had landed on them instead — actually, he had an idea but he just didn't want to think about it.

"W-We've got to go!" Turvar said. "This p-place is falling apart!"

"Oh really? I would've never fucking guessed!" Flame yelled rather annoyedly.

Hearing that made him worry that maybe Flame didn't like him already? Like he had already screwed up his whole reputation to him? But he didn't have the time to dwell on that now; right now, they really needed to pick up the pace and get out as soon as possible.

He grabbed Umber's talons again and started pulling with newfound strength, ignoring the burning exhaustion in his arms. He listened as bits and pieces of the ceiling fell and then crashed against the floor; a few of them even hit him in the head and back.

Just a little further! he thought. He could see the doorway at the end of the narrow hall and the moons' light was beaming through, telling them that they were just about out.

But as the seconds passed, more and more debris fell from the ceiling, constantly hitting and smacking him; this place was about to collapse, with or without them inside, and he couldn't use the gem's power to save them this time. All of his energy had been drained from the other two blasts and dragging Umber through the restaurant.

"H-Hurry!" Turvar yelled. "I d-don't think I can blast u-us out of this!"

"Why the hell not?! You're animus, aren't you? Just cast a protection spell or something!" Flame argued.

"N-No, I'm not animus!" Turvar admitted. "Just- hurry!"

They kept pulling and pulling for what felt like forever, debris continuing to fall more and more. A few pieces of wood got in between his scales and kept stabbing into him, but he kept pulling and ignored the stinging pain that followed with every step.

Until finally, they were at the door and Turvar let go of his front talons and moved back to his legs so that they could push Umber up and over the slight bump on the bottom frame of the door. Flame was out first, then Umber, then him and they were finally safe from the fire.

A wave of relief fell over him as he stepped out into the cold, night air. It took him until now to realize just how hot it was inside, and just how sweaty his scales were.

He fell into the grass and let his arms rest for the first time in what felt like years and praised the moons for letting him live for one more day. As he rested, he began painfully plucking each of the bloody wooden splinters from his scales and threw them on the grass next to him, some of it staining his scales.

He flicked one off to the side and noticed that Flame hadn't even given himself a second to rest yet; instead, he was spending his well-earned downtime burying his head into Umber's shoulder, crying all the while. Every breath between his sobs only made him feel worse for the SkyWing.

I mean, really. Seeing your partner like that definitely didn't feel good. He could hardly look at a dragon who was doing something slightly exhausting without feeling like he had an obligation to help.

But the building wasn't done with them yet. Turvar could hear loud

creaks and cracks coming from the building; ones far louder than just a beam falling. He knew exactly what was about to happen, but Flame seemed far too distracted to realize it himself.

They were only twenty feet from the doorway when he saw the roof cave in, sending stray pieces of sharp, broken wood flying in all directions.

Without any regard for his own safety, he jumped in front of Flame and Umber and spread his wings as far around them as he possibly could. Flame finally took his head from Umber's shoulders to see what he was doing and locked eyes with Turvar right as he closed his, bracing for a thousand splinters.

A few seconds passed though and, to the extent of his knowledge, nothing was stabbing him in the back.

Just when he thought he was safe though, a bunch of sharp pains shot up his back, wings, and neck. The pain pushed him forward, but he caught himself before he could completely lose his balance. This went on for at least five seconds until the sounds stopped and he could finally open his eyes.

He looked around, numb from all of the pain until he looked down at Flame to check to see if he had been hurt. Something was off with his face though. Almost as if...he was scared? Shocked? Astonished by his bravery? No, he looked...horrified? As he took a closer look though, he saw that his eyes clearly weren't staring at him, but were staring at something beside him instead.

"F-Flame? A-Are you okay? ...Flame?"

He looked over at his left wing and to his horror, saw at least five big splinters painfully stabbed through his skin, causing blood to pour from the wounds and drip onto the grass and painting it a dark red. He looked over at his other wing and saw another four stabbed through it as well. He was sure that a few were poking out of his back and neck from the uncomfortable way his scales shifted when he moved.

As the seconds ticked away, he could finally feel the pain that

followed such an injury. He tried pulling his wings in but that only made the pain worse and he bared his teeth. So instead he lay flat on his stomach and began trying to pull them out, but that only made it worse.

Will I ever fly again? What will Ruby think of this? How long will I be in the hospital before I can leave? Will these be painful to get removed? he thought, along with at least a million more questions flying through his mind all at the same time.

That's when he heard the talonsteps of many, many dragons approaching. He looked up and with a jolt of surprise, and saw at least eight different medics — most of them being SkyWings, but there were a few MudWings to help carry some of the heavier dragons with a couple of stretchers. Most of them ran over to Flame and Umber, while a couple came over to him to inspect his wings closer.

"Can you move your wings?" one of the medics asked.

"U-Uhm, yeah, I-I think so," Turvar answered.

The medic jotted down a note on his notepad, looking up at Turvar's wings a few times just so that he could assess the injuries.

"Does it hurt?"

"Y-Yes, very much s-so."

The SkyWing closer inspected his wounds, getting his talons up close to them. He tapped the splinters a few times which sent shockwaves of stinging pain throughout his wing and made him wince.

He moved onto his back, doing the same thing. It took him this long to realize just how many splinters he had sticking out of him — he wasn't exactly excited to find out, either.

After a few moments of this, the medic finally broke the awkward silence that filled the air.

"Alright, here's what we're going to do," the medic said. "We're

going to take you to the hospital and they'll take care of you there."

"W-When can I l-leave?" Turvar asked.

"I can't say for sure, but it should only take a day for them to get these out and check for an infection."

They brought one of the stretchers and laid it flat on the grass. It was completely white and had two sturdy wooden handles attached to each side.

It reminded him of one of the big carpets that Ruby had replaced because it "didn't match her style". If he was being honest, he quite enjoyed the carpet; it was soft and comfortable and he sometimes wished that it had been in his room instead so that he could sleep on it whenever he was too tired to make it to his bed.

Without needing to be told, he lay down flat on his stomach, trying his best to sprawl his wings out so that they didn't get in their way.

He looked at the building for the first time since it collapsed and all he saw was a flaming pile of wood and concrete, and the IceWings who were blowing their ice breath all over it.

He looked over at Umber and saw that he was already on a stretcher with Flame crying over him. A few of the medics kept urging him to let them look at his burned talons. Not wanting to leave Umber's side though, he wouldn't budge.

"Sir, we just need to take a look," one of the female medics said.

"Will you all just shut the fuck up already?!" Flame said annoyedly, tears dripping down his face. "My boyfriend is sitting here, in a stretcher, looking half NightWing with all of his burnt scales, and you honestly think I give a fuck about my talons?!"

"I can assure you, he'll be in good talons-"

"GOOD TALONS?!" Flame exclaimed with a bit of a fake laugh. "ARE YOU FUCKING SERIOUS? YOU WOULDN'T EVEN GO IN THERE AND SAVE HIM YOURSELF AND YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT HIM BEING IN 'GOOD TALONS'?!" He stood up and glared

at her, his eyes looking as threatening as the anger bubbling inside of him. He began taking a few steps towards her, to which she slowly backed away.

"THE ONLY REASON HE'S LIKE THIS RIGHT NOW IS BECAUSE ALL OF YOU WERE TOO MUCH OF FUCKING COWARDS TO DO ANYTHING!"

"Sir, I'm gonna need you to back away."

"NO, NO, NO. NOT UNTIL YOU HEAR WHAT I HAVE TO SAY." He kept taking more and more steps toward her. She bumped back against a tree that she hadn't seen before, giving her no more room to back up. "HOW ABOUT, I DON'T KNOW, MAYBE A 'SORRY FOR LETTING THE ONLY FUCKING DRAGON IN YOUR LIFE THAT HAS EVER HAD ANY MEANING TO YOU, BURN IN A GODDAMN FIRE' FIRST? THE ONLY FUCKING REASON THAT I'M STILL ALiv-" he trailed off, stumbling over his talons and eventually falling to the ground.

His eyes fell closed as he lay there, motionless and no longer screaming profanities at the medic.

What happened? Turvar asked himself. *Did he just...fall asleep?* That's when he inspected Flame's body closer and saw a small dart sticking out of his neck, and that gave him all of the information he needed: one of the medics had tranquilized him.

"Alright, get another stretcher for this psycho," said a low, rumbly voice that belonged to another medic. He was standing over by Umber and he obviously didn't like his job very much by the way he slouched around. "Three moons, this job gets worse and worse every day," he muttered.

Turvar was about to say something in defense of Flame, but he bit his tongue because he didn't want to draw any more attention to himself. He knew that Flame was probably a really good dragon, just extremely protective over Umber and would do anything to keep him safe.

They put him on a stretcher next to Umber. The two MudWings

lifted Umber up in the air, while a few other SkyWings had to carry Flame. With a little bit of nervousness, he watched as they were flown higher and higher. He didn't want to think about what would happen if either one of them fell — unconscious and heights didn't exactly fit together very well.

That's when he felt himself lift up in the air. Looking over, he realized that two SkyWings had finally taken the role. He had to admit, it felt a bit weird being so high in the sky without flying himself, but it was also a bit scary seeing how both of his wings had been rendered completely unusable after protecting Flame and Umber — well, he could probably use them just enough to land if he really did fall, but he knew that was highly unlikely to happen.

His mind wandered as he was flown through the air. He went back and played the scenes over and over again; it was like a parasite that had wiggled its way into his brain and refused to leave no matter how much it was encouraged to. He did feel horrible for Flame though, and he really hoped that Umber made a recovery.

So, he started thinking of the ways he could use his influence as a prince to help them both out as much as he possibly could. That's when his mind landed on the fact that the Sky Kingdom was one of the most wealthy kingdoms in all of Pyrrhia, and he just so happened to have some say on what they could spend money on.

Besides, a tiny hospital bill can't be that expensive, right? Compared to the towers and towers of valuable metals and gems in their treasury, a hospital bill probably wouldn't even put a dent in it. Maybe he could even convince her to get Umber some of the more expensive treatment, just to really make sure he doesn't get any bad scars?

He was far too tired to think about all of this right now though, and he knew that he was going to have a long night in the hospital. From the painful process of having these splinters removed from his wings to having the wounds sterilized with rubbing alcohol, he was going to need all of the energy he could get.

Chapter 15

Flame's POV

Flame slowly opened his eyes and something he immediately noticed was how bad his head hurt; it felt like a migraine times ten, and he had just dreamt about the weirdest thing, too.

He couldn't exactly remember what happened because it was already a little blurry, but he remembered that he dreamt about Umber being trapped under a beam and he completely destroyed his talons getting to him, and then an animus (which he remembers not trusting in the slightest) came in and did this weird blast thing to get them out, and then swore he wasn't animus even though it was extremely obvious that he was.

Calm down Flame, it wasn't real, he thought. *Umber is probably lying right beside you now, waiting to be woken up for our anniversary.*

Except when he brought his talons up to his forehead, they looked a lot whiter than usual. Like there were...bandages wrapped around them? He looked over at his other talon and saw the same thing.

Actually, he wasn't even in his bed — the sheets weren't the same color. Instead of being under their brown, stale blanket, he was now laying under some even more stale white blankets. He thought they looked extremely similar to the ones they use at the hospitals, which was weird because they didn't live in a hospital.

Then it hit him like a stabbing pain, one much similar to how it feels being stabbed in your heart, but there was no blood, and no fatal hole in his chest. They *were* in the hospital, and that dream wasn't a dream at all; it was real, and Umber really did get trapped under that beam, and he really did burn his talons, and that animus really did help them escape, and Umber really did get trapped under that beam.

And Umber really did get trapped under that beam.

And Umber really did get trapped under that beam.

The more he thought about it, the more he realized just how real this situation was. The words hit him harder and harder as he replayed them over and over again, constantly sucker-punching him in the throat and leaving him breathless.

"Oh, hey! You're awake already!" a voice from across the room said.

As he regained his senses, he could see that he was in an all-white room, in an all-white bed — that was quite uncomfortable — and there was a curtain right beside him that seemed to split the room in half, which could easily be pushed aside since it was attached to a metal bar connected to the ceiling.

He looked over to where the voice came from and could see a bright pink RainWing sitting in a wooden chair in the middle of the front wall, right by where the door was. He seemed to have been fidgeting with some of the grooves in it before he realized that Flame had woken up.

"I've been waiting here for-"

"Where's Umber?!" Flame interrupted. Ignoring his pounding headache, he leaped out of bed and was immediately hit with a fresh serving of vertigo, stumbling over his talons and almost falling over a few times.

The RainWing immediately shot up from his chair and ran over to help Flame balance.

"Woah, woah, take it easy," the RainWing said. "You just survived a fire, you should lay down for a bit-"

"Where the fuck is Umber?!" Flame said again, except this time it was more of a demand than it was a question. "I'm not '*laying down'* until I know he's okay!" He batted his talons away, using the bed as support instead.

"Alright, alright, calm down," the RainWing urged. "He's right here. I'm warning you though, I don't think you're gonna like what you see." Without giving him a moment to consider this, he threw the

curtain aside to reveal Umber. Poor, sweet Umber who wanted nothing more than to take Flame on a great first anniversary, but instead was awarded with a scorching hot beam to the snout.

He was covered head to talon in bandages — that's what he assumed anyways since he was half covered in blankets — which was somehow worse than seeing his scales completely charred and made him audibly gasp. He couldn't put his talon on exactly why, but he knew it had something to do with the fact that he was just...laying there, completely unable to move and speak.

Is he even awake? Flame wondered with another stab of heart-wrenching dread shooting through him.

"U-Umber...?" Flame whispered. He could already feel the tears forming in his eyes as he desperately tried to hang onto the hope that he could feel gradually fading away.

Without a moment of hesitation, he ran over to him, ignoring the constant, excruciating sting in his talons with each step. His headache worsened once he felt tears uncontrollably dripping down his face like a newly formed waterfall splashing down and smacking the ground with a loud *crash*.

He grabbed onto his bandaged arm, his grip light and gentle so that he didn't hurt him even more. Tears dripped off of his face and landed on the bandage, turning it a darker gray color.

Why... Flame thought. *Why is this FUCKING WORLD AGAINST ME?!*

He could feel his grip tightening around his arm as he buried his head into Umber's chest. His heart pounded and his stomach contracted as his sobs split through the air of the small, white room. The stinging in his talons got worse as the seconds passed, but that only made him angrier.

Not because of the pain itself though, he didn't care about that. But because the world had only let him off with a mere warning — a warning that screamed that he wasn't allowed joy, he wasn't allowed happiness, and most importantly, he wasn't allowed love. And any attempt he made at having any kind would be ripped away

faster than he had the chance to get it.

Yet, through all of the pain he was currently going through, he couldn't drown out the feeling that the RainWing was staring at him. He wasn't going to leave Umber's side to yell at him though because if he was being honest, he really didn't care enough right now.

"Hey, if it makes you feel any better, he isn't in a coma or anything," the RainWing reassured. "He's been tranquilized so that he doesn't wake up and have to feel the pain."

Flame considered this for a moment and let those words run wild through his mind, before feeling another jolt of anger pulse through his entire body.

"WHY THE FUCK WOULD THAT MAKE IT BETTER?" Flame screamed, shooting his head up and whipping around to face the RainWing. His vision was still blurry from the tears that soaked his eyes, but he could still see how startled the RainWing was by the way his scales immediately shifted to light green.

He jumped back, obviously spooked by Flame's sudden outburst.

"I-I don't know, I just-"

"YEAH, THAT MAKES IT SOOO MUCH BETTER KNOWING THAT THE ONLY REASON HE ISN'T TALKING TO ME RIGHT NOW IS BECAUSE HE WOULD BE GOING THROUGH THE WORST FUCKING PAIN OF HIS LIFE!" He could feel his headache getting worse as he screamed and put his talons to his head while wincing.

"I-I'm sorry," the RainWing apologized. "Let's just calm down and we can talk this over, alright?" He walked over to Flame and tried to pat him on the shoulder to comfort him.

"DON'T- fucking touch me," Flame barked, smacking the RainWing's talons away. Flame went back and sat down, hovering over Umber, while the RainWing slowly walked back over to his chair and sat down, going back to fidgeting with the grooves in the wood.

What followed though wasn't exactly Flame's idea of "talking it

over" though, because they sat in silence for the next hour. The whole time, Flame gently gripped Umber's talons and stared into his emotionless eyes as he slept. The pain he was going through hadn't gotten any better in this time — not his talons or his heart.

It felt so strange to sit by Umber for this long, just watching him sleep. Normally, Umber would have woken up by now and either kissed him and then immediately wandered into the kitchen to find something to eat, or pull him back into bed and fall right back asleep again.

But there was none of that playful spark inside of him anymore. Even though he looked peaceful sleeping like he was, Flame could still tell that that was all except the truth. They both had developed this special bond between each other so that they knew exactly when they were sad, angry, or just worried about something, even in sleep.

Right now, he could tell just by staring at him that he was in some sort of distress.

Is he dreaming about it? Please don't be dreaming about it, Flame thought. Maybe if he thought about it hard enough, he could telepathically change his dreams? That's what he hoped anyways as he thought about happier things he could dream about. *Dream about our first kiss! Dream about something with your sibs! Just dream about anything except what just happened, please!*

Our first kiss... he remembered with another stab of pain in his heart.

They had just gotten back from their first date and Flame had finally given in and accepted to try Umber's tea. At first, he was a bit suspicious of the mixture and thought that it was most likely going to be disgusting and a waste of time, but to his surprise he actually kind of liked it.

He liked it enough that when Umber turned away, he tried to drink a bit more than just a tiny sip and he ended up burning his tongue, which made Umber wince once he saw it.

"Do you want me to get you some cool water?" Umber asked.

"Nah, I think I'm okay," Flame answered as he pushed his tongue around in his mouth to see if he was, in fact, okay. "I burn my tongue all the time. I'll just walk it off."

"I didn't know that was something you could 'walk off'," Umber said with a hint of sarcasm. He had a maniacal expression on as he jumped at the opportunity that Flame had so freely given him.

"When you're as tough as I am you can," Flame retorted, shifting in his seat and shooting him a confident smile.

"Suuuuuuuuure," Umber humored as he took his cup off of the table, blowing on the steam so that he didn't make the same mistake that Flame had before.

Flame watched as Umber took a few sips, then set it back down on the table. Flame had been sneaking glances at the leather satchel Umber had around him all day, waiting for the moment that he would finally give him the gift he promised.

A few times, he swore that he could hear hints of paper crumpling around in there, but it surely wasn't something insanely valuable or anything; he had probably bought something from the store.

He watched as Umber reached for it, and he immediately sat up in anticipation, giddy excitement running through him as he realized that he was finally going to figure out what the gift was.

What he was expecting was something like flowers, or maybe a note telling him how much he loved him, or maybe even a graphicoll he bought at the store (which Flame would've most likely already read), that would all explain the crumpling he heard every now and again.

That's when Umber pulled out a scroll with ink soaking through that made him sure it had to be a scroll of some kind.

"Is that what I think it is?" Flame whispered with even more excitement pulsing through his veins.

"I hope you like it." Umber had a big smile spread across his face.

He carefully turned the scroll around and his talons and opened it. He

was met with an unfamiliar title that he had never seen before which surprised him because he had seen basically every title of every graphicoll in Possibility, and Possibility had almost all of the biggest graphicolls!

"Did you buy this?" Flame asked with spiking curiosity.

"Erm, no, I made it." He blushed a bit at Flame's approving nod.

"It's a graphicoll!" Flame exclaimed, radiating pure happiness and joy. Perhaps he could just freeze time and stay like this forever just to see the way Umber smiled, but he didn't have nearly the power to do that.

They inspected the graphicoll for a few minutes, going through all of the funny drawings that Umber had made. Flame was in it, of course. Ibis was in it as well, except she was wearing all-black clothing and seemed to most definitely be the villain of the story.

"So...do you like it?" Umber asked, looking for some sort of confirmation as if there were any doubt that Flame did.

"Of course I love it! Umber, this is incredible. No one's ever gotten me a gift like this- I don't even know- I'm just-" He kept stumbling over his words in pure shock that anyone would ever spend their time making him something like this.

But something came over him in this moment; something that made him want to be as close to Umber as possible, and never let go as if his life depended on it.

He put the graphicoll down, knowing that it was now or never that he would be able to express his gratitude, and that was to do the only thing he thought would be appropriate in this situation: kiss him.

This would be Flame's first kiss, and most likely Umber's too, but he didn't care if he did it horribly or not. He needed Umber right now, and he needed him to know that he needed him, just so that he might realize he needed him as well.

Without warning, he pressed his lips against Umber's, slowly pushing his talons against his chin. Umber was obviously caught off guard by this. Maybe he didn't want it? But he didn't pull away or anything and this

was all the confirmation Flame needed to continue.

The warmth and taste of Umber's mouth was almost hypnotizing to him like he couldn't stop even if he wanted to. But after a few seconds, he reluctantly pulled away, their pants filling the air and their hearts beating fast.

"*Thank you," Flame said with a pant.*

"*Yeah- I mean- anytime- no problem," Umber stammered. "I'm glad you liked it. I know it's not as good as your other graphicolls and it might have some tea stains on it and I guess I shouldn't have mentioned the tea stains-"*

"*Shut up and kiss me," Flame interrupted, pulling Umber's snout in for another kiss.*

But that was cut short when Flame heard the door swing open, making them both freeze in place as if they had been frozen by Darkstalker.

He realized that they had just been caught, by none other than Sora and Jet.

By the time he got to the end of the memory, he found himself crying once again, tears pouring from his eyes and soaking the white blanket.

As sadness turned to anger, he turned to the wall and punched it as hard as he possibly could, causing a great big hole to form and cracks to spew out in all directions for a few inches before stopping.

He took his talons out and looked at the bandages around them stained with blood and felt the pain begin to set in, adding to the singeing of the burns. He was already so mentally exhausted that he hardly cared right now though, and just fought through it like he had been doing for the last hour.

"Hey! C'mon, we just had these walls painted!" the RainWing complained, though Flame suspected that he wasn't actually annoyed because his scales had splotches of pink with the rest being a dark purple.

Flame didn't respond to this and only stayed silent for the next couple of seconds as he contemplated punching him in the snout for saying anything to him right now.

What would Umber think? the back of his mind whispered, which made him immediately decide to stay beside Umber. And after a few moments, his anger dissipated and turned back into sadness.

"How...how bad is it?" Flame muttered through his tears, turning to face the RainWing. This was a burning question of his that he's had since he had woken up, but he'd been too scared to find out so he tried avoiding the question completely.

But right now, he needed to know because he could hardly stand another second of wondering if Umber would be able to be woken up soon. Just the thought of hearing his voice sent excitement running through him, but that quickly faded whenever he realized the state he was in right now.

"It's...pretty bad," the RainWing admitted with a drooping voice, his scales shifting to fully dark purple. "I didn't want to say anything, but...he's not looking too good."

Flame felt a wave of shock run over him, causing him to feel like he wasn't even in the real world anymore — like he was in a dream. He kind of wished that was the case though so he could pinch himself and wake up from his worst nightmare any moment now.

That's when he heard the door creak open, and a new SkyWing came walking in. She was wearing one of the strapped white pieces of fabric around her neck, which also had one of the red crosses on it. Except this one had a few lines above it, almost like the roof of a house in a drawing.

She seemed to be holding a needle full of some sort of liquid that he assumed she'd be injecting into Umber to help with his burns.

She took a glance at the hole in the wall, bits and pieces still falling off indicating that it had just happened. Truthfully, he didn't care if the hospital got mad at him about it right now. But she seemed to just ignore it as if it was normal.

She began walking over to them with the needle still in her talons, and Flame shifted aside so that she could inject Umber without being in the way.

"Talons," she said, gesturing toward Flame.

Does she want me to hold out his talons for her? What kind of fucking hospital is this? Flame wondered with a bit of rage — like these were the dragons taking care of him.

Flame grabbed one of Umber's talons and held it out steadily.

"No, *your* talons," she corrected. "*You* still need to get a shot so your burns don't get infected."

Normally, Flame hated getting shots, but the fact that she didn't have to give Umber a shot meant that he could sit by him while she did it, and hopefully that would ease his nerves a bit even given the situation.

Reluctantly, he set Umber's talons down and reached his out, and held them as steady as possible while he braced for it. The needle wasn't extremely big, but he hated getting all shots, regardless of their size.

He gripped Umber's talons in his, blankly staring into his eyes as he waited for her to finish. He got so lost in thought as he stared blankly at Umber that he didn't even notice that she had already stuck the needle in him and was already putting the cap back onto it.

"Alright, I'll be back in a few hours for your second one," she informed.

Right before she walked back out the door though, Flame still had a question knowing that she was probably the only dragon qualified enough to give him the cold hard truth.

"Wait!" Flame called out. "Is...he going to live? I want you to tell me the truth. I can't just fucking *sit here* for days and wonder 'Is he going to wake up?' or am I just doing this all for nothing?"

"I-" she paused, trying to think of what she'd say next. "*If* our calculations are right — which they definitely could be wrong — we think that..." she hesitated. "We think that his chances to live are slim," she said lowly.

No...

Hearing this put him in a state of immobilizing shock. He couldn't tell if he wanted to cry, punch another hole in the wall, scream at himself for letting this happen, or all three. It felt like his whole world had been shattered into a million pieces, like a window having a ball thrown through it and the shards being scattered all across the world so that there was no chance they could be put back together.

"We're working on figuring out something for him though!" she quickly said, obviously picking up on what Flame was feeling. "We just got a donation from Queen Ruby that was specified to go toward his treatment."

There was a pause.

"I should've stayed with him..." Flame muttered. "I should've stayed with him and died in that FUCKING FIRE, BUT THAT TURVAR MOTHERFUCKER HAD TO PLAY HERO!" Flame screamed. Looking out the door, he could see a few heads had turned to look at him. He didn't care though; right now, he was filled with so much anger and despair that it outweighed whatever was causing him to care about what others thought of him.

He could see that the RainWing's scales had turned completely white, and could even see that a few spots along his arms and legs had begun turning invisible as he contemplated disappearing and running away.

"NOW INSTEAD OF BEING WITH HIM RIGHT NOW, I HAVE TO SIT HERE AND WATCH HIM SLOWLY FUCKING DIE!"

"H-Hey, I'm sure he was just trying to help," the RainWing said nervously but calmly, trying not to provoke Flame any further. That didn't work though, as it just made his anger spike even higher.

"TRYING TO HELP?!" Flame screeched louder, thick clouds of smoke rising from his nostrils. "THE ONLY THING HE MANAGED TO DO WAS TURN MY LIFE INTO A LIVING HELL! HOW ABOUT I TAKE THE DRAGON YOU LOVE AND SCORCH THEIR SCALES UNTIL THEY TURN INTO A FUCKING NIGHTWING, THEN LEAVE THEM TO ROT IN A GODDAMN HOSPITAL UNTIL THEY DIE? HOW'S THAT SOUND? CAN RAINWING SCALES COVER THAT UP?"

By now, he could see that the RainWing was gone; either he had run out without Flame noticing somehow, or he had turned invisible, or maybe even both. A few of the heads that were looking before quickly turned away once they saw Flame look in their direction and began pretending to focus on something completely random instead.

"Get the fuck out," Flame said. Though he wasn't screaming anymore, he made sure to sound as threatening as possible. "Both of you, GET THE FUCK OUT!"

He watched as the nurse quickly turned around and left, obviously frightened by his screaming. He heard another set of talons clacking against the floor behind her, signaling that the RainWing had still been in the room and turned invisible to hide from him.

The door closed seemingly by itself and Flame sat down by Umber. His eyes were still closed as if nothing had happened at all — the same exact expression, looking like he was just getting a good night's rest. But he wasn't, and Flame found himself getting the same unnerving feeling knowing that his face didn't match up with how he really felt.

Umber...I can't lose you. Please don't go. Please don't leave me, Flame thought. *This isn't fucking fair! Why can't I go with him?! Why do I have to be the one that survives?!*

A part of him wished that he could switch places with Umber right now, but then another part knew that then Umber would have to sit over him and go through the same thing. He'd take it better though, right? He wouldn't be screaming and swearing at everyone, scaring them to the point where they went invisible, would he?

He realized that there was no point to dwell on what *could have been*, because this was happening right now, and there was no turning back time. Though he still wished he could rewind time and restart the day, walked up and down that hill a million times, drank whatever tea Umber wanted him to, and went to that restaurant. Except they would leave a few seconds early and he'd gobble up that scavenger in a millisecond.

That's when he had a moment of realization: *He* wasn't the only dragon that cared about Umber. He had his sibs and his winglet that also should probably know what's happened to him.

The closest dragon was Sora, who couldn't be more than a couple of minutes away from them. The second closest was Clay, who was at Jade Mountain, and then he could stop at the Mud Kingdom to try and find the rest of his sibs.

He knew what they all looked like from the few times he's seen them, but it would definitely be a bit hard to find them in the crowd of dragons that lived there as well.

There was still one issue though: Flame didn't want to leave Umber's side. What if something happened to him while he was gone? What if he wakes up and he isn't there with him?

It'll only be a few hours, Flame told himself. *Maybe less if I hurry. That's not enough time for something to happen to him, right? What are the chances?*

As he stood up, he heard a knock at the door.

"I thought I told you to fuck off!" Flame yelled. "Leave me alone!"

"I-It's me, Turvar," the voice said. "I just w-wanted to check up o-on you two."

Flame felt another jolt of anger surge through him, as if it was the only emotion he was allowed to feel today. But Turvar being here was a mix of good and bad. Seeing how he's an animus and everything meant that he could heal Umber, right? Just the thought of that immediately made him hopeful.

He stomped over to the door and swung it open, the wood slamming against the door stopper and making the whole thing rattle. Now that he could see Turvar, he realized that his wings were all completely wrapped in bandages from when he jumped in front of them, along with a few patches on his back.

Flame yanked his wrist, pulling him inside and slamming the door behind them, and then locked it.

"H-Hey!" Turvar said, backing up away from Flame who was blocking the door. Flame knew that this would do nothing if he really was animus, but he had to seem as threatening as possible to get him to heal Umber.

"Heal him," Flame said. "Don't you fuck with me right now!"

"W-What?" Turvar said confusedly. "What d-do you m-mean?" He had walked back a bit, trying to avoid Flame's threatening gaze — his stutters were definitely worse than before so he had to have been considerably scared, which was odd because he's never met an animus that was scared of anyone.

How is an animus this damn nervous? Flame thought. *If he wanted to, he could probably kill me in a second!*

"Cut the shit and fucking heal him already!" Flame said, sounding as threatening as possible. "I already know you're animus, so get on with it already!"

"I-I'm not a-animus!" Turvar denied.

"Will you stop lying and JUST FUCKING HEAL HIM ALREADY?! I SAW YOU IN THE BUILDING, SO WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?!" Flame screeched. His throat began to hurt from all of the screaming he had done today, but he needed to convince Turvar to heal him, so it would be worth it in the end.

"I-I can't!" Turvar said.

Instead of screaming even more though, Flame allowed himself to calm down for a second by taking deep breaths because yelling at him was obviously getting him nowhere.

"Prove it," Flame said, shooting him a glare.

"W-What?

"Prove to me that you're not animus, and I'll let you leave."

"H-How do I-I prove it?

"I don't fucking know! Cast a spell or something." Flame paused, figuring out the perfect spell for him to cast on Umber. "Go up to Umber, put your talon on him, and say 'I enchant this dragon's burns to heal in an instant, with no side effects or scars and he will wake up once his burns fully heal'. No stuttering, and no covering it up with another spell in your head or so help me moons!"

Turvar sat there for a couple of seconds, trying to process everything that was happening before Flame growled as a reminder of what he was supposed to be doing.

"A-Alright, I'll t-try!" Turvar walked up to Umber while trying to avoid Flame as much as possible, rested one talon on his arm, and closed his eyes, repeating the phrase that Flame told him to. He almost stuttered a few times while saying it, but eventually got through it relatively smoothly.

They both waited a few seconds, the tension high in the air but nothing happened; Umber didn't wake up, and none of his burns seemed to have healed — though he couldn't exactly see them under the bandages, he just assumed nothing happened because he wasn't currently kissing Umber.

"Nothing's happening...WHY IS NOTHING HAPPENING?!" Flame yelled. "Did you cover up the fucking spell? I know animus tricks! What the fuck did you do?"

"N-Nothing! I-I swear!" Turvar said desperately.

Flame stood there for a few minutes considering this answer before realizing with a stab in his heart that Turvar might not actually be animus.

But how did he do that blast then? Flame wondered. *SkyWings can't*

just do that! I can't do that, so why the fuck can he?!

"How did you do the blast then?!" Flame demanded. "Some sort of hidden SkyWing power? How'd you do it?!"

"I-It's- uh..." Turvar hesitated, to which Flame growled at him again. "I-It's an a-animus touched gem..." He held up his right arm, pointing to the sparkly gem hidden among his scales. "R-Ruby gave i-it to me w-when she adopted m-me, and i-it's supposed to k-keep me safe. T-That's it, I s-swear!"

After a moment of thinking, Flame finally realized that all of this was the truth and that Turvar really wasn't an animus that could solve all of his problems with a few words. One thing stuck with him though, and that was the fact that he said Queen Ruby gave it to him.

So he's a prince then? Flame realized.

"Get the fuck out," Flame spat. He unlocked the door and opened it before moving to the side so that Turvar could get through. Turvar quickly trotted over with his head down but stopped right before leaving to tell Flame something.

"I-I'm really sorry I c-couldn't help," he said lowly. "b-but I hope U-Umber recovers s-soon." He had a bit of sincerity in his voice, which reminded Flame that he actually *did* care a little bit for Umber.

Once he was sure that Turvar was gone, he slammed the door and felt like his world had just been shattered once again. It was as if the world had just given him all of the answers to his problems, then took them away right before he could read them. The world was just playing with him and he knew it! Like he was their puppet, and he wasn't in control of anything but was just along for the ride it took him on.

"FUUUCK!" Flame screamed, crumpling onto his knees on the floor and slamming his head against the tiles a few times. "FUCK, FUCK, FUCK, FUCK, FUCK, FUCK!" He banged his talons against the floor until he felt his wrists begin to bleed and fracture, the pain being a futile distraction from what he was actually feeling.

"IS THIS WHAT YOU WANT?!" Flame screamed at the ceiling as if he was talking to a higher power. "ARE YOU HAVING FUN DESTROYING MY FUCKING LIFE YET?! FUCK YOU, FUCK YOU, FUCK YOU, FUCK YOU!"

His screams turned into sobs echoing through the room, paralyzing him to lay there for the next hour and cry. His migraine from before was raging, becoming even worse than the pain in his talons and he felt like puking a couple of times as his stomach uncontrollably contracted every time he sobbed.

Finally, though, he mustered up the strength to stand up and saw that there was a pool of his tears on the floor, along with a little bit of dried blood from his wrists.

I have to tell the others, Flame thought reluctantly in between sniffles and pulses from his headache. He didn't want to leave Umber's side, but they all deserved to know. His wrists started to hurt from putting pressure on them as he stood up. The blood was dry though, leaving a big, red stain that was darker than his scales on each wrist.

Author's note: I'm really tired after finishing this. That last part was Flame's raw emotions, which I had to take on in order to make it as realistic as possible. This chapter might be a little bit lower quality than usual, but it's really hard to write stuff as depressing as this and still keep it higher quality, especially being a first time writer with the timeframe I've given myself. I think (hope) it's probably acceptable to most people though.

Chapter 16

Flame's POV

Flame flapped his wings as hard as he could, wishing that the cool breeze could be a distraction from what was happening; wishing the feeling of it smacking him in the face could fix all of his problems right now; wishing that it could make Umber wake up and run to him without any trace of a burn or scar on him.

But that wasn't going to happen, and he knew it. So all he could do right now was fly as fast as his wing could take him so that he could get back to Umber soon.

He had already visited Sora and gave her the horrible news. She thought he was lying at first. but when she noticed the many bandages wrapped around his talons and the way he limped on his front two legs, she realized that Flame hadn't been joking at all. Sora, Jet, and Zephyr all flew to the hospital faster than Flame had the chance to tell them to be careful with him.

As he flew, he couldn't stop thinking about the last words that Umber had said to him.

"*I'm done having my life saved over and over again! It's* my *turn to save someone this time."*

Those words had been echoing through his mind as if he's been screaming them as loud as he could in a cave ever since he left. He knew they meant *something*, but he didn't know exactly what that *something* was

Does it have something to do with Crane? Flame wondered. It wasn't exactly the most important thing to think about right now though, so he tried to focus on what he would say to Clay once he got to Jade Mountain.

'*Clay! Umber's dying'? No, that's too much. Maybe something like*

'Umber's in a coma'? No, that's even worse! What about 'Clay! Umber's in the hospital right now with severe burns that the healers said are so bad that he might live all because I wasn't fast enough to save him, and then an animus prince — no — a prince who has a weird animus touched gem that allows him to create literal fucking blasts with his mind saved us'? Yeah, that sounds about right.

He eventually gave up on thinking about what he was going to say though, and his mind went to thinking about Umber. He — once again — thought back to their first kiss, wishing he could go back to that time, take him in his wings, and pull him as close as he possibly could, and never let go, similar to what he wanted to do right now.

He never knew how much he really needed Umber until he lost him, and that feeling was almost unbearable. How had he gone his whole life without him? Maybe he had always been like this, and Umber was the glue that held him together. So without Umber, he would go back to his old self, hating the world and everyone in it. Not because his mother never gave him any attention though, but because the only dragon he had ever truly loved had just sacrificed himself to save him — and probably the only one ever willing to love him back, too.

He knew he had to just keep flying though because if there was any chance he would wake up, he wanted it to be around his family and friends...or his passing.

Shut the fuck up! Flame screamed at himself, refusing to delve deeper into that topic; he didn't want to explore that option even more than he already had. *Umber isn't going to die, so I don't have to think about that! He's going to live and I know that for a fact!*

That's when he finally saw that Jade Mountain was only twenty-ish miles ahead. It had been an excruciating two hour long flight, every minute making him worry more and more about Umber.

With a newfound strength, he pounded his wings harder and harder until they felt like they would fall off, and it only took him a few more minutes to reach it now that he was *really* flying.

He stomped down against the cold stone in front of the cave, stumbling from the unbalanced landing from his talons. He could see inside of it a bit and could tell that everyone was either in between classes, or they ended for the day.

Truthfully, Flame couldn't remember his schedule in the slightest, nor could he remember what time classes were let out.

Hopefully, they were over for today though, because one thing's for sure: he definitely didn't want to tell Clay about Umber's condition in front of a whole class of dragons and dragonets who looked at him like he was trash; that's definitely what he felt like right now anyways.

Umber, just hold on a little longer! I'm almost done! Flame thought.

Without even giving himself a second to rest, he began running through the dimly lit cave, shoving through dragons while trying to remember where Clay might be. Really though, he had no idea where he could be right now so he tried to remember his way to the library where he knew Starflight would be, because where else would he be? Outside?

There were a lot of new dragons here that he hadn't seen before — but also a lot of familiar faces that looked at him with pure disgust, even after two years.

Maybe if they figured out I was dating Umber, they'd change their minds about me, Flame thought. Though, he didn't really care because Jade Mountain Academy days were long gone and he'd likely never have to see them again after this.

Finally, though, he made it to the library where he saw a few dragons reading in some of the seats. Sunny was reorganizing some of the scrolls on the bookshelf in the harder to reach places. She was standing on her tippy talons on the stepladder and it looked like it would fall over any minute now.

And of course, Starflight was sitting behind his desk, listening for any dragons' footsteps while sliding his talons against a scroll, which had these weird dots on it in seemingly random order.

"Akebi?" Starflight called out. "Is that you?"

"Oh, hey Akebi!" Sunny said without turning around. "I just found those scrolls you asked for yester-" She turned around, finally realizing that he wasn't anyone named Akebi — or even a RainWing for that matter. "Flame?" She nearly stumbled off of the stepladder at the sight of him. "It's so good to see you! Did Umber-"

"Where's Clay?" Flame frantically interrupted, panting all the while. "It's an emergency!"

"Wait, what happened?" Starflight asked. He showed genuine concern on his face, similar to how Umber looked whenever he was trying to be comforting

A memory flashed in his head of Umber; not just any normal everyday memory though. It was one of him holding Flame's talons in his and looking him dead in the eyes with the same look he saw on Starflight's face.

What had happened that day was Flame had another freakout in public when a SkyWing pointed at the two of them while they were walking, muttered something to his little dragonet and they both laughed. He remembered being so angry at him, swearing at him with no regard that a dragonet was listening to him say all of those horrible things.

That memory left his heart in pieces, knowing that he may not ever get Umber's support like that ever again. He felt like crying right now — crying and letting all of his emotions spill out in front of all of these dragons.

So that's exactly what he did. He crumpled to the ground and began sobbing. Tears immediately began pouring from his eyes like a thunderstorm tearing down the walls he had built up for everyone except for Umber. He knew that this would make it easier though, so he didn't really care.

"Flame?" Sunny jumped off of the stool and ran over to him, resting her talons on his back. "What's wrong? What happened?"

"What's going on?" Starflight asked, hunching over his desk. "Is Flame crying? Why is Flame crying?"

"I-I don't know! Flame, are you okay?" Sunny continued stroking her talons along his back, similar to what he did with Umber whenever they cuddled.

He instead lay there for a few minutes, bawling his eyes out and burying his head in Sunny's stomach as she rubbed her talons against his back. He couldn't lie though, this did sort of comfort him. But it wasn't Umber, and it would never be the same as Umber. The way he was able to do all of the right things to help him calm down was something that no other dragon in Pyrrhia could do; not even Sunny: one of the sweetest dragons in this school.

The few times he opened his eyes, he could see the other dragons' eyes had popped up from their scrolls and were instead staring at him.

"U-Umber's in the hospital," was all he could mutter before his sobs pulled him right back in.

"What?!" Starflight and Sunny both exclaimed at the same time.

"Is he okay? What happened?" Sunny frantically asked. She snapped her head toward one of the MudWings. "Terra, where's Tsunami?! Tell her to get Clay!"

"Uhm, I think she's in one of the study rooms?" she said. "I'll go find her!" She threw the scroll she was reading down and ran through the library entrance, sensing the urgency of the situation.

They lay in silence for a few minutes with Sunny gently holding Flame as he sobbed. It was already hard enough telling Sora — he had to focus all of his strength on not crying like he was right now. He wanted to create a façade that he was strong in this situation, but he knew no amount of strength could stop him from crying right now.

"It's okay, Flame," Sunny said softly. "Let it all out, we're here for

you."

He didn't know why, but these words made him cry even harder. He buried his head even deeper into Sunny, his wails echoing throughout the cave.

As time passed, his sobs turned into deep, quick, ragged breaths. Each breath was accompanied by a sharp intake of air as if his throat was being constricted by talons squeezing around them. Each inhale made his stomach hurt because of the almost constant contracting and expanding that it has done today. He could feel his headache coming back now and felt his tears begin to run dry.

That's when he heard a few pairs of talons clacking against the cave entrance, but he didn't lift his head from Sunny's comforting warmth. Shivers ran down his spine, making him feel as if an IceWing was blowing cold air against his scales.

"Flame? What happened to Umber? Why's he in the hospital?" he heard a familiar deep voice ask, who was definitely panicked from the sounds of it.

He came over and felt a pair of massive talons against his back as he gestured for Sunny to get up. The MudWing kneeled down and gently took Flame's talons in his and Flame lifted his head to meet Clay's. His eyes were full of sympathy and worry, making Flame feel better just from his gaze. Flame started in his eyes for a few moments, trying to gather his words and form a sentence.

"M-Me and U-Umber were at a r-restaurant for our an-anniversary, and a fire b-broke out, and I DON'T KN-KNOW WHAT TO D-DO BECAUSE HE ISN'T WAKING UP!" He choked on every other word as if they were being shoved down his throat.

Clay's face turned from sympathetic and worried, to panicked and shocked. He turned and looked over at Tsunami whose face had the same shocked expression as Clay's — actually, everyone in the room was shocked now that he was looking around. She gave him an approving nod as if Clay had telepathically asked her a question.

"Who else knows?" Clay asked. He looked inches away from tears

but kept a brave face on.

"Uh- S-Sora, Jet, and Zephyr," Flame answered. "I-I think th-they're with him now."

"Okay, here's what we're going to do," Clay said. "We're going to get Turtle and bring him back to the hospital, alright?"

Turtle? What about the others? Flame thought.

"Wh-Why Turtle?" Flame questioned. "Why him? W-What about everyone e-else?"

"Oh- them too," Clay corrected himself. "That's what I meant...yeah." He said it as if he almost said something he shouldn't have, but Flame had no idea what that was.

What's so special about Turtle? Flame wondered. *Why does Clay want him specifically?* Though he didn't care all that much because he obviously had a plan, but he hoped it involved healing Umber in some way.

Then Clay took off out of the library and into the twisting halls of the academy, where most of the dragons from before had gone back to their sleeping caves. Once again, he had no idea where they were going and he was only relying on Clay running through the seemingly endless twists of the halls so that he could follow loosely behind.

Not only was he tired from running, but he was also extremely hungry and thirsty as he was too busy mourning, crying, and flying all day to even begin to think to do either of those things. He thought about asking where the Prey Center was when they found everyone but decided against it once a reminding image of Umber laying in the hospital bed flashed in his mind; he knew he didn't have time for that.

After what felt like an eternity, Clay finally slowed and turned into one of the caves, disappearing behind the curtains. He followed inside and realized that this must be Qibli and Winter's cave — or technically just Qibli's now — when he saw familiar pale yellow

and black scales in the middle of the room.

Moon was sitting upright while staring at the door as if she had been expecting them, and so was Qibli. Their tails were intertwined and Moon looked like she had just been crying for some reason. There were a couple of opened scrolls on the floor that they must've been reading before, along with a few pencils scattered along them.

They both had a look of worry plastered on their faces, almost as if they *knew* what Clay was about to tell them.

"Where's Turtle?" Clay asked hurriedly.

"We don't know!" Moon said, matching the same energy as Clay. "We sent Kinkajou to go and look for him as soon as I heard..." she trailed off, peering over at Flame. "Realized that we need him for this math problem, of course!"

Why the fuck is everyone acting so weird? Flame wondered. *First, it was Clay wanting Turtle specifically, and now Moon's acting all weird.*

Moon seemed like she was trying to focus on something, and there was a weirdly awkward silence between them for a few moments.

"...Anyways, they should be back any minute now and we can get ready to leave then," Qibli said, breaking the silence.

"Wh- hold on!" Flame abrupted. "You don't even know why I'm here! You don't even seem surprised to see me! What the fuck is going on with you all?"

There was another moment of silence where everyone looked around at each other nervously. Flame could feel the anger bubbling inside of him. He didn't want to have another outburst, especially not in front of his friends, but they hardly even knew what was going on, yet acted like they knew everything!

"Since we have time before Turtle gets here, I'll tell you what the fucking issue is!" Flame said angrily. "Umber is in the hospital right now, and I left his side to come tell you all!" He began raising his voice louder. "The LEAST you can do is give me a 'thank you' instead of acting like you know everything when frankly, I don't

think I've even said a fucking word to you since I walked in this cave!"

"Flame, calm down-"

"DON'T TELL *ME* TO CALM DOWN! I'M ALLOWED TO BE ANYTHING BUT CALM! TELL ME WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON WITH YOU BEFORE I WALK OUT OF THIS DAMN CAVE AND FLY BACK TO THE HOSPITAL, WHERE I SHOULD BE RIGHT NOW!"

"We...uh," Qibli stuttered, trying a glance over at Moon.

The tension in the air was high as he waited for Moon to finally tell him how they already seemed like they knew everything, and why Clay wanted Turtle so badly. That tension was finally broken though when Moon spoke up.

"Flame, please don't take this the wrong way but," she paused. "I...I can-"

Moon's POV

"Qibli, were you listening to anything Sahara said?" Moon scolded. "A decimal is *smaller* than a whole number!"

Qibli threw his head back and sighed. "When will I ever actuallyuse this? I'll never need to count decimals whenever I'm taking down animus dragons!"

"Well, if Turtle or Anemone ever go rogue, you'll be the first one to know," Moon joked with a laugh under her breath.

"You mean *I'll* be the first one to know," Kinkajou interjected. "You might need one of my super-strawberry spells again!"

"Kinkajou the Great, taking down animus dragons one strawberry at a time," Qibli mocked. They all had a bit of a laugh out of this, but in the midst of all of the giggling, she picked up something that was the *opposite* of happy. Terror? Anxiety? Fear? A mix of all three? She couldn't tell.

But as the seconds went on, the feeling only got stronger and she

could clearly tell that it was a mix of guilt, fear, and anxiety mixed around and jumbled into one emotion. She tried to block it out, but it was so strong that she couldn't help but start to feel these emotions as if they were her own.

"Guys, stop for a second," Moon said quietly, raising her talons at them and closing her eyes.

She could feel her talons begin to shake, and her anxiety rise. It felt as if she was trying to get somewhere as fast as possible, but she didn't know why or what that *somewhere* was.

But as she tried to focus on these emotions, a flash of an image popped into her head that sent her stumbling back with a gasp: it was Umber. Not *just* Umber though, he was in a hospital bed with bandages all over him. He looked like he was just sleeping, but something inside her knew that was far from the case.

"Moon? Are you okay? What's wrong?" Qibli asked, gripping one of her talons.

Umber, just hold on a little longer! I'm almost done! This echoed through her head for a few seconds before fading away.

Then, an extremely sudden wave of emotions crashed over her and she could feel her trembling talons grip the stone. Her breaths quickened and she began feeling lightheaded like she could float up to the roof any minute now and stay there. Her vision began to get blurry as well as tears poured down her scales uncontrollably.

"Moon?! What's happening?! What's wrong?!" Qibli panicked, tightening his grip on her talons.

Even though her body was basically completely paralyzed with anxiety at this point, she spoke up, knowing that they didn't have any more time to waste.

"Ki-Kinkajou! G-Get Tu-Turtle!" Moon stammered. Her vision began to go black and her eyelids began to feel heavier and heavier as the lack of oxygen finally began getting to her. She desperately tried to get a full breath of air, but it was like a reflex that she couldn't

overcome, no matter how hard she tried.

But then, the emotions suddenly disappeared. They left no trace of ever being there except for her quickened heart rate and shaky talons. She finally got a full breath of air and shot up as she regained her senses.

She looked over at Qibli and saw that his necklace wasn't around his neck anymore, so she unconsciously started looking for it around the room before realizing that it was around her neck now.

"Moon! Are you okay? What did you see?!" Kinkajou asked. Her scales were completely white.

"Go get Turtle! Hurry!" Moon rushed.

"Why-"

"Don't ask questions, just get him!"

Without any further questions, Kinkajou bolted out of the room. Moon looked over and could see the concern spread across Qibli's face, looking for some sort of answer to what just happened.

"What was that?" Qibli asked. "What the hell happened?"

"Flame's here, and Umber's hurt!" she said worriedly. "Hurt badly, like, really, really badly!"

"What do you mean 'hurt badly'? What happened to him?"

"I don't know! All I saw was a flash of him, but I don't remember too much except that he was in a hospital bed. He must be in bad shape if Flame's this terrified." She could still remember the feeling of dread and panic flooding through him, which made her shift her scales uncomfortably.

They sat there for the next few minutes while they waited for Kinkajou to come back with Turtle. She held the pouch close to her neck so that she didn't fall into another panic attack, she didn't think she'd be able to handle another one. She would've gone out to help find him, except she didn't even feel like she could stand after

what had happened, and Qibli wanted to stay close to her in case anything else happened.

Moon had her head resting against Qibli's, and their tails had intertwined without her even realizing. Qibli kept a close grasp on her, pulling her close. As the shakiness in her talons finally disappeared, she heard loud *thumps* against the stone and they both shot their heads up.

A few seconds later, a massive dragon pushed through the curtains that was unmistakably Clay, followed by a familiar SkyWing that looked like an ant compared to him.

The conversation that followed was tense though. As Flame got angrier and angrier, she was tempted to take the pouch off from around her neck so that she could figure out what to say to calm him down. She ultimately realized that would only make her angry, and possibly give her a headache.

"Flame, calm down-" Moon tried saying before getting interrupted by another outburst.

"DON'T TELL *ME* TO CALM DOWN! I'M ALLOWED TO BE ANYTHING BUT CALM! TELL ME WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON WITH YOU BEFORE I WALK OUT OF THIS DAMN CAVE AND FLY BACK TO THE HOSPITAL, WHERE I SHOULD BE RIGHT NOW!" Flame screamed. His yelling shook her to the core from the raw anger running through him.

She hadn't remembered the last time she saw him this angry, but it was probably when Darkstalker bound him to the cave floor next to Stonemover for days.

"We...uh," Qibli hesitated, taking a look over at Moon

Moon could feel her heart start beating through her chest. They stood there for a couple of seconds before she realized that he needed to know. She knew she couldn't keep this from him forever — they were friends after all.

"Flame, please don't take this the wrong way but," she paused. "I...I

can-"

"I FOUND HIM!" Kinkajou interrupted as she barreled through the curtains. "And I found Peril too, but she's outside because..." she trailed off. "Flame? What are you doing here?" After a few seconds of awkward silence, she finally realized what was happening. "Ohhh."

She took a glance over at Turtle and could see all kinds of confusion spread across it. He tucked his wings in uncomfortably as all of the eyes were on him at this point, especially Flame's menacing glare.

"Wait, wait, what's going on?" Turtle asked confusedly.

"I'll tell you what's *going on*," Flame said nastily. "I just flew here from the fucking hospital because Umber was in a fire! But guess what? None of you seem to give a shit! You all just seem to know everything that's happening without me needing to tell you!" Flame paused. His face looked inches away from breaking out into tears. "It's just...I'm so confused and Umber's hurt, and I...I JUST DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO!"

Moon saw tears begin to pour down his face as he crumpled to the cave floor and wrapped his wings fully around his head. His cries bounced through the dimly lit cave, ricocheting into each of Moon's ears. Right now, she didn't know what to do or how to help Flame because of the skyfire, but what would happen if she took it off? Would Flame's emotions be too much for her right now? Or could she handle it and be able to help him?

She didn't put much thought into this before she found herself taking off Qibli's necklace, almost like instinct. It's not like she *wanted* to go digging through Flame's mind right now — for his sake. But she knew that it was the only way she would be able to understand him right now.

Within an instant, everything came chirping back to her: the other dragons' thoughts that she had naturally learned to ignore, the images crammed into the back of her mind that she could hardly see unless she focused, but more importantly, she could see everything that Flame was so scared of.

"Moon-" Qibli started.

"No, no, it's okay," she interrupted. "Just let me do my thing."

She closed her eyes and as she focused more on some of Flame's deeper thoughts, she could see things that she couldn't see before. There were light flashes of burning wood, the loud cracks of beams falling, the scorching hot fire against his talons as he desperately tried to lift a beam off of Umber, and the constant, lingering terrifying thought about losing him. As she tried to dig deeper into his subconscious, it was almost like she had experienced these thoughts firsthand — almost like the time when Flame had visited Stonemover with Umber.

She snapped back to reality with a jolt to see that Clay was already sitting down beside Flame with his talons resting on his back. He was giving them a stare, which she interpreted as him not knowing what to do.

"I'm sorry!" Flame sobbed, his voice being muffled through his wings. "I-I just can't s-stand looking at Umber r-right now!"

Moon didn't have to read his mind or see his face to know that tears were probably streaming down his face in fat globs right now. Everyone was mostly standing around in shock, hardly being able to process what was happening.

FUCK, FUCK, FUCK, FUCK, FUCK! Flame's mind screamed, almost like a broken record, over and over.

Finally, though, Moon broke the silence.

"Flame, it's going to be OK," she said hopefully. "Once we get to the hospital, everything will be alright, alright?"

"No Moon, it's not going to be alright!" Flame yelled from under his wings. She could hear his sobs still. "I could've saved him, but I wasn't fast enough! This is my fault!"

She began picking up guilt. It was radiating off of him like light on a candle, almost overwhelming her ability to push it to the back of her mind with all of the other dragons' thoughts and emotions.

She walked over to him and gently lifted one of his wings that were covering his head and could clearly see many, many tears pouring down his face and dripping on the cave floor. This made her wonder though: how much has he been crying today?

It must be really rough right now, so probably a lot, she thought.

"Flame," Moon said gently, almost sounding like a whisper. "This *isn't* your fault, alright? Once we get back to the hospital, everything will be OK, trust me." She shot a begging stare at Turtle, to which he gave an agreeing nod.

"But...I still have to go to the Mud Kingdom to tell his sibs," Flame said with a sniffle.

"Sunny will go," Clay interjected. "She'll be more than happy to, you should be with Umber right now."

Moon shot a look at Clay, and accidentally let a few of his thoughts slip through. He was worried for Umber, but he hoped that if he was brave, Flame would be too — which was honorable, but he shouldn't be bottling up his emotions like that and she knew it.

She pointed her talons at her head while keeping her gaze and mouthed "Sorry".

Moon, we agreed you wouldn't get in my head! Clay thought at her. *Quit it!* So, as soon as she could, she shoved his thoughts into the back of her mind again and kept them there.

She looked back down at Flame, who thankfully was looking at the floor when she did that; she had almost completely forgotten that he had no idea about her mind reading yet.

"Please?" Moon tried, reaching out one of her talons. "I'll go tell Sunny right now if you want."

She could feel the struggle going on inside Flame's head. On one talon, he could go back to the hospital to see Umber and put his trust into another dragon to tell his sibs. But on the other talon, he could go and tell them himself and make sure that they get the message, but he'll have to wait longer to see Umber.

"Alright, fine," Flame said, grabbing Moon's talons and lifting himself off of the floor. "I swear if Sunny doesn't..." he trailed off, remembering the way she held him in her talons. He couldn't get mad at her and he knew it; she was too kind. "Nevermind."

"Alright, let's hurry though, it's going to get dark soon, and I don't want to fly in the dark; it's scary at night," Turtle said. Moon thought this was odd though, because can't SeaWings literally see in the dark?

Author's note: A bit of a shorter one this time, mainly because I'm extremely burnt out after the last chapter. I want to take a break, but I also don't want to leave everyone in the dark for a week haha. Also, there should be a new thumbnail for this being uploaded soon (sorry AO3 readers) that's currently being drawn by my friend haha.

Chapter 17

Turtle's POV

They had been flying for the last couple hours, and Turtle knew that they were nearing the Sky Kingdom soon. The cold night air was smacking him in the snout and he could feel cold shivers running through his scales with every second that passed. He assumed everyone else felt about the same though, so he didn't complain about it either.

He couldn't help but feel a trickle of guilt course along his scales whenever he thought about the fact that he was going to wait to heal Umber until Flame was out of the room. Like, waiting to heal your friend who has life threatening injuries just because you didn't want your secret to be revealed *had* to be breaking some sort of rule, right?

Mostly, he was worried about what he would see when he walked into Umber's hospital room. But there was still the sinking dread lingering in the back of his mind about how they would convince Flame to leave the room for a few seconds so that he could cast the spell.

Maybe he would leave on his own once they thought of the spell? Though, that seemed unlikely.

He was also contemplating something he could enchant on Umber to heal his burns, because he had to enchant *something* on him.

Worst came to worst though, he would probably just enchant a piece of cloth and rub that on his burns.

Clay said something about him giving him a necklace a couple weeks ago, didn't he? Turtle remembered. *Maybe if it didn't get completely destroyed in the fire, I can enchant that.*

He looked around and spotted Flame in the front of the group — he

was the only one who knew where the hospital was, so he naturally led them all. He was constantly looking back at everyone whenever he flew too far ahead, since he was far faster than them all.

Peril, on the other talon, was flying near the back of the group so that she didn't bump into anyone.

As he was looking ahead at the distant Sky Kingdom, he felt a wing brush his. He looked over and could see that Flame had flown back next to him. His face was full of worry, confusion, any anxiety and Turtle could already tell he was about to ask him something, because why else would he have slowed down?

"Turtle," Flame said. "Why did Clay want you to come so badly? What are you all not telling me?" He had his voice lowered, sounding like a completely different dragon than before; sounding like the dragon he knew before this mess.

There's a lot we aren't telling you... Turtle thought.

"I- uh...I don't know," Turtle lied. "Maybe he just wanted to make sure I knew?" Flame gave him a glare and he looked like he'd burst out into another angry fit like he did a couple hours ago, but he wasn't angry enough to scream at him.

"Why won't you just tell me?" Flame asked. Though he didn't sound angry, he sounded more like he was begging to know. "We've been friends for almost two years now! Do you not trust me or something?

Turtle sighed. "It's...difficult," he responded. "We'll tell you eventually, just- not right now."

"*We'll?"* Flame echoed. "You mean they all know? Am I the only dragon here that *doesn't* know? Does Umber know?"

This made Turtle's anxiety spike. It's not that he didn't want to tell Flame, but it was more of a buildup of anxiety over the last couple years that made it harder everyday. There were a few times where he was about to tell him, but got cold talons last second.

"Yes..." Turtle said quietly. He tried saying it louder, but all that

came out was a mutter. "Yes to both..." He could see the slight twitch in his eye as he said this, so he prepared for lots of screaming to come barreling his way in a couple of moments.

But instead of screaming at him, he just flew back to the front of the group without saying a word. He spotted Moon shooting him a stare (who was flying closer to the front), and she slowed her flying until she was next to Turtle.

Turtle sighed, turning to look at Moon. "How mad is he?"

"Pretty mad..." Moon said. "But hey! At least he counted down from ten!" There was an awkward silence where she realized that it wasn't funny.

Turtle looked down at the peaks of the mountain and hills, disappointed in himself for not only lying to Flame for this long, but also lying to his face just a few seconds ago. He now realized just how angry Flame would be when he found out that he was an animus.

"Hey, don't beat yourself up over this," Moon said, shifting a bit closer to him. "He'd probably be more angry if you told him right now anyways."

"It's not that, it's just that I wish I told him sooner," Turtle said. "If I would've just said something at the start, then he wouldn't hate me so much right now." He paused, looking ahead to see that the Sky Kingdom was close. "It doesn't matter right now anyways, Umber is waiting for us." He gestured his talons toward the slowly darkening Sky Kingdom as all of the lights slowly faded.

They flew for the next thirty-ish minutes where Flame didn't say a word to anyone — or look back to check on any of them for that matter.

The lights had almost completely gone out, except for a few at the fronts of buildings and the palace. They were right outside of the walls of the Sky Kingdom now, so it shouldn't be more than a couple minutes until they were at the hospital.

At last, they landed down at the front of the hospital. The streets were dead quiet as he looked around at the surrounding area. It was definitely nice here with the pretty colored buildings, and the perfectly clean paths, and few dragons looming around wearing expensive jewelry. But nothing could compare to living underwater — though, that's probably because he was quite literally *made* to live underwater.

Flame walked inside of the hospital's waiting room, which was only lit by a few candles. There were a bunch of wooden seats where a few dragons sat who were mostly sleeping, except for one dragon, who was hunched over and looking down at his clasped talons nervously. There was also a SkyWing sitting at the front desk, but she didn't seem to care about them much.

He looked over at Moon to see that she had her talons gripped tightly around Qibli's skyfire, since she was probably reading every dragons' thoughts in this hospital, including Umber's.

Unconsciously, he checked to see who had come in with him, mainly to check how odd it looked for them all to be here at once.

Moon, Qibli, Flame, Kinkajou, Clay, Turtle counted. *Wait, where's Peril?*

He looked back at the door to see Peril shooting him a stare through the window on the door, so he quietly slithered back.

Peril can't come inside, Turtle realized.

"Peril-" he was cut off.

"No, no, it's fine," Peril said with a disappointed look on her face. "Just tell me when you heal him, and I'll find a place in the grass for now."

"Are you sure?" Turtle asked. "I can cast a..." he trailed off, flicking his head around briefly to see if Flame was listening, but he was more focused on preparing himself to see Umber again. "A spell."

"No. No more spells," Peril said sternly. "Besides, what would you tell Flame? That my scales just *cooled down* or something?"

Turtle thought about this for a moment. What *would* he tell Flame that wouldn't expose his magic? It's not like he could just forget about her firescales, and he would surely realize that *something* magical was going on. Regardless though, he still felt bad about leaving Peril outside to be stared at by all of the other SkyWings who probably knew who she was.

"Once I'm done with the spell, I'll come outside and tell you right away, I promise," Turtle said.

"Alright," Peril agreed. "But hurry up, I don't like the way Flame acts without Umber; he's always angry, and I can tell it gives Moon a headache." Turtle gave her a little nod and turned around back to check on Flame, who was whispering to himself.

Clay had been watching the whole thing, and him and Peril locked eyes for a few moments before Peril gave him a nod and he turned back around with a worried look plastered on his face.

He let those words sink in though. If he was being honest, the new Flame kind of scared him. He missed the Flame that was always smiling, caring, joyful...happy.

But he knew he was just mourning, and this was just his way of dealing with it. He had no idea how *he* would react to losing the dragon he cared most for to a fire. Just the image of Kinkajou lying down on a hospital bed dying or...dead, sent a shiver down his spine.

That wouldn't happen though, and it won't happen to Umber, Turtle thought. *I just can't be found out by Flame, not right now.*

He walked up to Flame and lightly rested one of his talons on his shoulder. "You ready?" he asked comfortingly.

Flame looked over and jumped a bit, his face full of anxiety and fear of what he was about to see and batted Turtle's talons away.

"Yeah," he said dismissively, shooting him a glare that emanated anger.

Flame started through the waiting room to the top right corner,

where there was another wooden double door with a window on it, similar to the one they had entered through. Turtle turned around to check if everyone was following, and Moon still had her talons tightly clenched around Qibli's skyfire.

Flame pushed the door open to a long white hall filled with more doors. There was a staircase next to them, along with another one at the end of the hall, but he assumed that nobody else except him Flame knew because there were only a few candles still burning, leaving the hall to be eerily dark. The hall branched off near the middle, probably to more rooms with injured or sick dragons in them.

After a couple minutes of closely following Flame through the zigzaggy layout and up a few flights of stairs, they finally stopped next to a door with the numbers "251" printed on the top in black.

He knew what was on the other side of the door, so he mentally started preparing himself for what he was about to see next. He could feel his talons start shaking and his heart begin to race as he imagined the sight of Umber laying down with bandages wrapped all around his body.

I'll fix you though, don't you worry, Turtle thought.

He could hear Flame whispering to himself again. "Alright, c'mon Flame, you can do this. Just open the door, and walk in. No big deal, right?"

There was a pause for a few moments before Flame pushed the door open and walked in.

The room was almost pitch black, only dimly lit by the moons' light shining through the tiny window at the top of the middle back wall. He could see that there were four other dragons in this room other than Umber: Sora, Jet, Zephyr, and another SkyWing he's never seen before, who had bandages wrapped around his wings.

Maybe he was in the fire with them? Turtle wondered.

Sora was leaned over Umber and had fallen asleep with her head on

his stomach, while Jet was snuggled close to Sora, wrapping one of her arms fully around her and resting her head on her shoulder. Zephyr was sitting in one of the chairs by the doorway, slouched over asleep just like Sora and Jet.

The other dragon, on the other talon, was just laying on the floor with his head leaning against the other bed in the room, which couldn't be comfortable since the frames were made of metal.

Looking at Umber, he could see that he was almost completely covered in bandages, and one of his wings looked like it had been bent the opposite direction. The necklace was still intact and only had light scratches on it, so it was definitely usable. Just the sight of this made him sick though; looking at his *friend* like this made him sick. He wanted to run out of the room and never come back, but he knew he couldn't, he had a job to do.

Flame stepped forward and began stumbling through the darkness blindly, grabbing onto the bed for support and shifting up toward the candle, which he quickly lit with a tiny plume of fire.

The light immediately began hurting Turtle's eyes and he quickly covered them with his talons. It felt like being flashed by a SeaWing's phosphorus scales at full power, and he stumbled over to Umber's side of the room and sat down against the wall in front of his bed while he waited for his eyes to adjust to the sudden brightness.

"Jeeeet, close the curtainsss," Sora mumbled as she lifted her head up from Umber's stomach. "It's too earlyyy. Just give me five more min..." she trailed off, gazing down at Umber's beaten and burned body. "Oh moons, Umber! I completely forgot!" She fell into him with a hug.

Turtle looked over at the unknown SkyWing just to see that he was shielding his eyes from the light, but didn't say a word to anyone and just looked around in confusion.

"What's going on?" Zephyr said confusedly. "Oh...right." Her voice sounded a bit down as she remembered where she was and why she was here.

Flame looked over at Umber, his face looking about ready to break into tears. He sat down next to Sora, gripping Umber's forearm and looking down at his face.

Turtle felt a singe of guilt shoot through his heart as he looked at Flame's expression. Flame looked broken, like a shell of a dragon. Like a dragon whose wings were cut off and he was forced to forever walk until the day they died, and he had to force himself to stay put and not enchant Umber's necklace right now.

Jet looked around groggily at all of them. Her face went from tired, to sympathetic. "Oh- we can all go if you want. It's pretty cramped in here with all of you, and we've been with him like, all day now." Based on her tone though, she definitely did *not* want to go.

"What?" Clay spoke up, stepping up to the front of the crowd at the doorway. Turtle noticed that Moon was still clutching Qibli's skyfire. "No, no, it's completely fine, believe me. I lived in a cave for six years with-"

"Clay," Sora interrupted. "It's no big deal, really! Besides, I'm getting sick of this room anyways."

"Oh, come on," Clay said. "There's enough room for all of us in here!" As Turtle looked around, they definitely couldn't all fit in this tiny hospital room. *Maybe* if they took the bed out, but he doubted the hospital would just let them do that.

"No, it's okay," Zephyr said. "You and everyone else should be able to comfortably be with Umber right now. We've had our time with him, now you should, too."

Clay looked at them all, hesitant to let them leave. "Fine," Clay said. "You're coming back in here in the morning though, and I'll give up my spot if I have to."

"Clay, go see your brother," Zephyr said dismissively as she pushed past him. "Alright, let's go, Turvar."

"O-Okay," Turvar said nervously, quickly getting up and following her through the door. Jet and Sora both followed closely behind,

and Moon, Kinkajou, and Qibli all stepped aside for them before walking in and closing the door behind them once they were through.

It was just them in the room now, and Flame was still leaning over Umber, either lost in thought or completely numb to what was happening around him; or both. Moon, Qibli, Kinkajou, and Clay all stared at Umber for a few minutes, heartbroken and shocked. Turtle knew he couldn't; his stomach wouldn't let him and he knew it.

Eventually though, he assumed they got sick too and retreated away. Qibli and Moon laid down on the floor together, Kinkajou sat down in the chair, and Clay sat down right next to Turtle in front of Umber's bed.

"Turtle," Clay said, breaking the silence. "will you be alright? You're looking a little sick." He realized that he hadn't wiped the expression of horror off of his face ever since he walked in and saw Umber, and he quickly fixed that.

"Oh- It's just...hard to look at Umber like that is all," Turtle responded. He lifted his talons palm up and began staring at them, trying to think of the spell he'd cast. "I'm going to enchant the necklace you gave him," he whispered in Clay's ear. "I still have to think of the right spell though."

"You're probably going to have a lot of thinking time." Clay pointed toward Flame, who had his talons clasped around Umber's and he could clearly see tears dripping from his face, and onto Umber's bandages.

Clay rested his head down on the floor, and closed his eyes. And Turtle prepared for the long night he was about to have ahead of him.

5 hours later...

Everyone was asleep at this point, and the candle had burned out hours ago. Flame was asleep on Umber's lap, Clay was laying down next to him, Kinkajou had fallen asleep on the chair, and Qibli and Moon had fallen asleep cuddled together. Not Turtle though; he had

been up all night trying to come up with the perfect spell.

'*I enchant this necklace to make the wearer recover any burns with little to no side effects'? No, maybe 'I enchant this necklace to heal any burns this dragon may have with no side effects at all'? What if I just make it heal anything? That might get confusing though. I really should've just asked Qibli to help me with this!*

The only reason he hadn't woken him up was because of the tiniest little smirk he could see on his face whenever he was asleep next to Moon, and he didn't want to ruin whatever amazing dream he was probably having with this nightmare of a situation.

He looked around and could see that the sun was beginning to shine through the window, so he wouldn't have much longer to come up with a spell.

"Turtle?" a voice said from beside him whispered. "You're still awake?" He looked over to see that Clay had already woken up and was staring at him.

"Yeah, I've...just been thinking of a spell all night..." Turtle whispered back. "I don't want to screw it up somehow and have it not work or something."

"Hey, I'm sure whatever you've got right now will work. I mean, you're the one with the magic, so you must know what you're doing with it," Clay said comfortingly.

I sure hope so, Turtle thought.

"What are you two talking about?" Kinkajou asked groggily.

"Oh, nothing," Clay said. "Does anyone want some food? I saw that they had a food bar last night, and I'm sure they're open for breakfast." Turtle noticed that he had been sneaking quick glances over at Umber throughout the whole conversation.

"It's morning already?" Moon interjected. She stood up and immediately checked on Umber, but only saw Flame sleeping on his lap. "Qibli, wake up, Clay's getting breakfast." She hit him on the shoulder lightly.

"It's morning already?" Qibli mimicked, pushing himself up off of the floor and shooting a glance over at Umber just like Moon and Clay had. "Just get me something breakfast-y."

"I'll be back in a few minutes," Clay said, opening the door and closing it quietly behind him.

They all sat there for the next couple minutes, waiting for Clay to come back up with their food. Qibli and Moon just sat next to each other with their tails intertwined, staring at Flame for most of the time.

Turtle considered waking him up a few times, but backed out last second because he knew that Flame would probably just yell at him or something, and they weren't on the best of terms right now anyways.

"Qibli," Turtle called out, instantly grabbing his attention. "I need your help with this spell. I don't want it to do the wrong thing, or not heal him, or do something we can't see until it's too late."

"Well, what do you have right now?" Qibli asked. "Have you thought of everything that could happen?"

"Well, I think. I've been up all night trying to perfect it, just to make sure nothing else happens except-"

"Will you all shut the fuck up?!" Flame interjected angrily. "It's too early for this shit."

"Flame? How long have you been awake?" Turtle said, worrying that Flame might've overheard something he shouldn't have.

"Long enough to know that none of you ever sleep! Now shut up so I can go back to my dream."

Turtle could see Moon turned a little sad at the mention of his dream, and assume that they had probably ruined it for him. This realization made him feel a bit of guilt drip across his scales because anything would be better than this situation.

"Flame, do you want any food?" Qibli asked. "Clay just went down

to get us all some breakfast a few minutes ago. You've got to be hungry after yesterday."

"No."

"Oh, c'mon," Qibli said. "I'm sure it'll make you feel better. Food always makes me feel better-"

"I thought I told you to shut the fuck up!" Flame barked, lifting his head and turning toward Qibli. "I'm not hungry, and I probably won't be for a while! Now will you just fucking shut up and let me...just let me go back to dreaming about Umber," his voice faltered.

Qibli's jaw dropped a bit, and guilt freely roamed across his whole face and he immediately backed off.

That's when the door swung open and in walked Clay with plates and plates and plates full of food. It didn't look like the most appetizing meal, but it was a hospital, so what would he expect?

He handed Turtle a paper plate full of dried out looking waffles, which only had a bit of maple syrup drizzled on top and a tiny fork. Kinkajou got a plate full of oranges and apples, likely picked fresh from a bowl that's been sitting out all night. Qibli got a plate of horribly scrambled eggs, which he shared with Moon, and Clay had a bunch of plates that had a mix of everything.

"Flame, do you want any?" Clay asked generously, noticing that he was awake.

"Fuck off," Flame said, his voice being muffled from being buried in Umber's chest.

"Alright, well if you change your mind, I'll leave a plate on the other bed for you." Clay walked over to the bed and set down a plate with a few dry pancakes on it, which had a similar amount of maple syrup on them than Turtle's did.

They ate their food in silence for the next couple of minutes. Flame didn't touch his food and only stayed with his head on Umber's chest. He swore he could hear a few whimpers come from his

direction, each one sending another shockwave of restless guilt surging through him.

He couldn't take it anymore, and he knew he had to do something. Every cry from Flame made him want to get up and do the enchantment right now, regardless if Flame was in the room or not.

I'm doing the enchantment. Right now, Turtle thought.

"Flame!" Turtle exclaimed, lifting himself up to his feet. Flame's head jolted up to stare at him, tears still rolling down his face. "Can you please leave the room for a second?"

Everyone's eyes were on him at this point, staring him down. There was a mix of happiness and surprise at his sudden outburst across them all, especially Clay who couldn't have looked more happy right now.

"Wh-What?" Flame said confusedly. "What the fuck? No!"

"Hey, Flame, it'll just be for a few seconds," Moon said hurriedly. "You can come back in right after, we promise!"

"What? Why the hell would I leave? What are you trying to do?" Flame asked.

"Please?" Turtle begged. "We'll just be...uh...talking about something quickly."

"No! Whatever you two want to talk about, just do it over there," Flame said. "I don't give a shit about your stupid little secrets right now."

Moon glanced over at Turtle and shook her head.

I have to... Flame may hate me for the rest of his life for lying to him, but I have to.

His muscles were tense and his heart began pounding as he built up the courage. He kept telling himself the words he needed to say, but they just kept being taken by the wind every time he opened his mouth. Until finally, he forced himself to speak up.

"Flame-" Turtle started.

"No! Tell me why you have to leave the fucking room!" Flame started. "What are you trying to do with Umber?! Why do you want me to leave the room so badly? If you hurt him, I swear to the fucking m-"

"I'M ANIMUS!" Turtle screeched. He could feel his heart pounding through his chest as he yelled, and the whole room instantly fell silent — too silent. Silent to the point where he could probably hear dragons' thoughts just like Moon if he listened hard enough.

After a few moments of this though, Flame finally spoke up.

"Bullshit," he said in a low voice. "You're lying to me again, just like yesterday!"

If he won't believe me, I'll just have to show him, Turtle thought. He looked around the room for something he could do anything with, and then remembered the plate of pancakes that Clay had set down on the bed a few minutes ago. They were still steaming hot, and the little maple syrup that was on them was dripping down the sides. Too bad they were dry though.

"There's only *one* SeaWing animus, and that's Anemone! You can't just keep lying to me! Why try and get my hopes up just to-"

"Come," Turtle interrupted, waving his talons at the plate of pancakes sitting on the other bed.

The plate quickly lifted in the air and drifted across the room. All eyes were on him and time felt like it had slowed a thousand fold as it elegantly landed in his talons. There was another moment of silence.

"No... This is some sort of joke or something! Why are you joking about this?! This isn't funny!" Flame yelled in denial.

"He isn't lying Flame!" Kinkajou interjected. "He's animus, and he's trying to heal Umber but you won't give him a chance to! Now, if you'll just let him enchant Umber, he will be perfectly fine and we can put this mess behind us!"

Flame thought about this deeply for a few moments; he could see the hesitation on his face as he considered everything.

"...So Umber knew?" Flame asked in a low, defeated tone, his voice full of betrayal and hurt. "How long?"

There was a moment of silence, where Turtle unconsciously tucked his wings in anticipation. "Two years..." Qibli spoke up, breaking the tension. "Back when you two first started dating." All that Flame did was stare at him angrily, and Turtle could almost feel the hurt emanating from him.

Just his cold stare made him want to run away and never look back. This new Flame was really beginning to scare him; he was nothing like he was a couple days ago.

"Two years," Flame echoed slowly, taking in a long, deep breath as if he was trying to calm himself down. "...So, what you're telling me is that you don't trust me, right? You never trusted me, did you?" He began raising his voice.

"No, Flame! It's not like that!" Moon pleaded.

"Really? Because that's not exactly how it fucking seems right now!" Flame said angrily. "What other things are you not telling me about that you've already told Umber?!" He snapped his head toward Turtle and took a step forward, expecting an answer.

Turtle could feel his talons shaking in fear and nervousness. He took a step back to even out the distance, knowing he had to say something soon; but the words had trouble leaving his mouth.

"A couple things..." Turtle muttered, staring at the floor in shame.

Flame just stood there and stared at him for a few moments, just like he had Qibli. Except he looked about ready to claw him across the snout for even speaking up, even though he was almost forcing him to. "Do the spell, and get the fuck out of my life."

"What? Come on, Flame!" Qibli said. "That's not something we can *just* tell you like it's nothing!"

"Oh yeah? Well you *told* Umber like it was nothing!" Flame retorted.

"That's different! He was in our winglet!" Qibli argued. "And you were just- we didn't know what you'd try and do! How can you blame us for that, especially after what you tried to do to Stonemover?" But his explanations were left ignored as Flame took in a deep breath and snapped his head toward Turtle again.

"Spell. Now," he reminded. "Say it out loud so I know you don't pull some bullshit."

He could hardly believe it. All of the years that they had built trust and friendship were instantly thrown out of the window. He had a sinking feeling that it had something to do with Darkstalker, but he wasn't Darkstalker. *He* had helped defeatDarkstalker for moons sake! He was probably the most trustworthy animus in all of Pyrrhia!

I should've said something sooner... Turtle thought in a fit of disappointment.

"What?" Turtle questioned in shock. "I wouldn't-" He cut himself off after seeing smoke begin to rise from Flame's nostrils, the smoke threatening him just by existing.

Slowly and nervously, Turtle inched his way past Flame and over to Umber. Just the sight of him began to make him feel sick to his stomach. Every bandage, every scratch, and even his obviously broken wing that had been forcefully put back into place to heal properly made him want to puke.

Just a few more minutes of this, and I'll never have to see Umber like this again, Turtle reassured himself.

He slowly reached his talons toward the necklace around Umber's neck, but was stopped right as he tried to recall the spell he came up with.

"Wait!" Flame interrupted, making Turtle's heart skip a beat. "Tell me the spell you came up with, *without* touching him."

"I- uh," Turtle mumbled as he struggled to recall the spell in this

stressful situation, backing his talons away from Umber. He looked over at Clay, who looked terrified of the whole situation; most likely more for Umber than Turtle, which was understandable. "I enchant this necklace to heal any and every burn on any dragon's body who puts it on, instantly waking them up from whatever sleep they may be in once fully healed."

Flame thought about the spell for a moment, before giving him to go ahead. "Say it out loud."

Slowly, he inched his talons toward the necklace, until he got a firm grasp on it. He looked over at Flame who was yet again, threatening him with just his glare. "SAY IT!" Flame screamed desperately.

He took a deep breath. "I enchant this necklace to heal any and every burn on any dragon's body who puts it on, instantly waking them up from whatever sleep they may be in once fully healed." He could feel the familiar tingle in his talons as the necklace enchanted, confirming that it worked and let go.

They waited a few moments. Nothing happened.

They waited another few moments. Nothing happened.

They kept waiting, until seconds turned into minutes, yet still, nothing happened.

Turtle's heart began to pick up in speed, as he slowly started to come to the realization that maybe the spell hadn't worked. *What did I do wrong?* he thought. *I spent all night on the spell! How did it not work?!*

"Why isn't he awake yet?!" Flame asked impatiently. "You said he'd wake up once he was healed!"

"I-I don't know!" Turtle responded, his talons shaking in anxiety. "I spent all night perfecting it! I don't know what could've went wrong-"

"WELL SOMETHING WENT WRONG!" Flame exclaimed. "EITHER YOU FUCKED UP THE SPELL, OR YOU COVERED IT UP WITH

ANOTHER!"

"He wouldn't do that Flame!" Moon pleaded. "You've known him for years! You know he'd never do something like that!"

There was a pause. "...Get out."

"Wait! Just let me try-" Turtle was cut off.

"GET THE FUCK OUT!" Flame screamed. "ALL OF YOU, GET THE FUCK OUT RIGHT NOW!"

Turtle could clearly see that there was more smoke rising from his nostrils at this point. He could see the rage and disappointment, mixed with a little sorrow in his eyes as a single tear ran down his face in the midst of his screaming.

Everyone began shuffling over to the door, hesitant to leave Umber, even Clay — who most definitely wasn't happy about having to leave — was following. He knew he would probably understand though. First Kinkajou, went through the door, then Clay, then Moon and Qibli, and finally Turtle, who stopped right before and chanced a glance back over at Umber.

He stared at Umber one last time before he had to leave, his burns looking completely unchanged. *I'm so sorry Umbe*r, he thought with a stab of guilt. *I should've thought of the spell more.*

He gently closed the door shut, leaving Flame and Umber behind, alone in the room together.

Author's note: Sorry for the unannounced break! I just felt really burnt out from writing and decided to take the week off. From now on, I'll try and say when I'm taking a break so that people aren't just left in the dark for a week. Also, I'm not really proud of this chapter, it could've been better. But I don't want to burn myself out again with emotional scenes, so I think it's better left alone for the most part haha. Also, potential break this week again (sorry) because I want to release an LGTBQ short for June. I'll try to get as much done today and tomorrow, and depending on that will determine if I

take a break or not.

Chapter 18

This part was supposed to happen last chapter but I didn't have any room for it, so just act like this happened last week.

Moon's POV

Moon sat down in one of the chairs a ways down the hall. Turtle, Clay, and Kinkajou had all gone downstairs to find Sora, Jet, Zephyr, and Turvar while she and Qibli stayed upstairs.

A part of her felt horrible for Flame, and the other felt guilty and scared about what he would do once he found out about her mind reading. She hoped that if — once Umber recovered, he would go back to normal and calm down.

As Flame's anger rose, more and more of his thoughts began slipping through her grasp. *FUCK!* Flame's mind screamed unexpectedly, causing her to flinch. *FUCK THEM! FUCK TURTLE, FUCK QIBLI, FUCK MOON, FUCK ALL OF THEM!*

She could feel her heart rate begin to pick up, so she put more energy into keeping his thoughts away specifically, images flashing through her head with what happened back at Jade Mountain.

But doing that let other thoughts slip through. Some were terrified, some were crying, and some were just straight up sleeping, including Umber. His mind felt...peaceful. Too peaceful for what he was going through. But nothing could be worse than Flame's thoughts right now, right?

Then she saw something — an image burying itself in her mind and refusing to leave while it got comfortable.

It was him and Flame, both sitting on their couch reading something called a "graphicoll" — or so they called it. It was dark outside, and she could clearly see that whenever he looked out the window, there were no houses, and there was no ground; they were

just in an empty void where the only thing that existed was their house and nothing else.

She could hear Umber sounding out every word in his head as he skimmed his talons underneath the ink-stained scroll.

"*The dragon res...restless- restlessly?" Umber looked over at Flame for confirmation, to which he just nodded his head with a smile. "Restlessly dug through the sand in the sc...orching heat, d-desper...desperately trying to find a memory he lost long ago," he read slowly.*

"*You're getting better, MudWing," Flame congratulated. "*But*, I think it's time that we stop for now." He rolled up the scroll and picked it up.*

"What? We were just getting to the good part!" Umber complained. He stood up with Flame, who walked around to the other side of the table and pulled out a box from underneath, and stashed the scroll inside before pushing it back under.

"*Well, it's getting late, and I'm getting tired." He walked over to their door and opened it, beckoning for him to come inside with him. Their room was just a seemingly black abyss that looked to have nothing on the other side. Even the dim light from the candle should let him see inside* at least *a little bit, and she could sense some unease coming from Umber.*

Flame disappeared through the doorway, and Umber quickly followed. "Wait for me!" he said with a laugh.

But once he walked through the doorway, everything turned orange — no — everything lit on fire. He jolted around only to see that the door he had just walked through was gone, and it was replaced with familiar red carpet and black wooden walls around him.

The row of carpet he was standing on was almost completely on fire, and he reflexively took a step back.

But as he did that, he tripped over a mass on the floor and his back thumped against the carpet. As he gathered himself, he realized that it wasn't just one thing he tripped over, no; it was two things: Flame and...Umber? No, another Umber; another version of himself, like he

was a ghost looking over his dead body.

As he looked down at himself, his scales were charred in all sorts of different shades of black and gray, some of them even flaking off from Flame's touch.

Moon gagged.

Umber hardly paid attention to that second part though, and only focused his attention on Flame. His eyes were closed, and he was tightly cuddled up next to Umber. He could clearly see tears coming from his eyes as he sobbed.

"*Flame?" Umber called out. "I thought I told you to run! What are you doing here?! You shouldn't be here!" But his cries didn't even seem to phase him, and he stayed curled up next to Umber.*

"*I'm so sorry, Umber," Flame whispered in his ear with a sob. "I couldn't save you in time. But don't worry, I'm coming with you."* These words sent a shockwave of sympathy through Moon, and she audibly gasped.

"Moon? What's wrong?" Qibli asked worriedly.

"*NO!" Umber screamed. "NO, STOP! RUN! PLEASE!" He tried to shake Flame, but his talons just phased right through him.*

Moon's breathing began turning into short, quick breaths, just like back at Jade Mountain when Flame got close. Umber was panicking, and there was almostnothing she could do about it. She put her talons to her temples, her head starting to roar with pain with each throb.

"Moon?!" Qibli said again. "Is it happening again?! C'mon, talk to me!"

Umber began to hear the roof above him start to creak and crack. And after an agonizing few seconds, one of the beams broke free from the ceiling and started hurling toward Flame. "FLAME!" Umber screamed, throwing himself forward and covering Flame with his body.

Except, he just phased right through him, and the beam continued

hurling down at them.

Her head was yelling in pain, and her headache became almost unbearable — excruciating, even. She screamed out in pain, gripping her talons on her head even harder than before.

She slumped forward and fell off of the chair, slamming against the ground and landing on her side; but the pain from that was nothing compared to what she was experiencing right now.

"Moon?!" Qibli yelled. "That's it, I'm stopping this!" He took his skyfire pouch off, and then everything immediately stopped as she felt it slap against her chest.

All of the thoughts just vanished, and the headache almost immediately disappeared. With this, she realized that tears were running down her face, and her heart was racing so fast that it felt like it might explode any second.

"Moon, are you okay?" Qibli asked as he dropped onto his knees by her side and grabbed her shoulder, shaking her a bit.

Though she was a bit shaken up, Qibli's warm touch made her feel better — it always made her feel better. She sprung up and wrapped her arms around him as tight as she possibly could, pulling him close. She could feel the full warmth of his scales soothing her heart when she felt his talons hug her back.

"What the hell happened?" Qibli asked comfortingly. "Was it a vision?"

"No..." Moon muttered in Qibli's shoulder. "I-I tried to push Flame's thoughts away but then Umber's dreams popped up and all of a sudden there was so much fire and screaming and-"

"Shhhh," Qibli cooed, gently stroking the scales along her back. "It's okay, it's over now." She could feel more tears begin to run down her face uncontrollably, her sobs filling the air from Qibli's comfort.

She pulled him in closer with her wings and buried her face in his neck, wishing like she could stay like this forever.

"I love you," Moon whispered shakily.

Flame's POV

Flame paced around the room in a panic, still trying to make sense of what had happened the other day. On one talon, Turtle was apparently an animus, but on the other talon, Turtle was APPARENTLY AN ANIMUS; an untrustworthy animus at that! Not *ONLY* was he an untrustworthy animus, but he was a fucking useless one as well!

"Fucking Turtle!" Flame muttered under his breath, his scales burning with rage. He had trusted Turtle, and now it seemed like everything was falling apart. How could he have been so blind? How could he have let himself get so close to someone who had such dangerous power?

I bet he's just like Darkstalker! Manipulating everyone with his magic so that they'll like him! Flame thought. *That* must *be what he did with the others, and now he maybe even did something to Umber! FUCK!*

Then, there was a knock at the door, and he was sure he knew who it probably was.

He had come in to look at Umber the most, which was understandable. He had also let Moon, Kinkajou, Qibli, Sora, Jet, and Zephyr in whenever they wanted to see him, but he would never talk to his winglet and ignore anything they tried to say to them. He even let Turvar in a few times; a dragon he didn't even know!

Like, he *knew* he wasn't the bad guy here! They deserved everything that he's done to them (which wasn't much, arguably. But he knew refusing to let them see Umber *would* make him the bad guy.

But of course, he never let Turtle in, not even when Moon or Qibli or Kinkajou or Clay tried to argue with him. He was probably trying to make sure whatever spell he put on Umber was working. *He* was the one exception to that rule because he was *protecting* Umber from whatever he had done.

He reluctantly walked over to the door, before he heard Clay knock again. "Yeah yeah, I'm fucking coming," Flame mumbled.

He swung the door open and saw the familiar saddened look on Clay's face as he walked through the doorway. "Is he doing any better?" Clay asked, stopping midway and turning his head to look at him. His voice was low and full of hopelessness; it was as if he was expecting the answer.

"No," Flame said matter of factly, sitting down in the chair.

Clay turned his head back down to the floor and continued walking, before stopping at Umber's bed and sitting down at his side. "Yeah, I thought so," he sighed, resting his talons on Umber's.

For the next few minutes, they both sat in silence — almost silence — the only thing keeping it from, being the bustling dragons' talonsteps in the hall that they could hear through the thin wooden door.

Clay turned his head to look at Flame. "You know, about the other day-" he started.

"No, shut the fuck up. I don't want to hear your sorries," Flame barked, shifting his scales angrily to the other side of the chair. "The only thing you can do to even *begin* to fix this is to keep that motherfucker away from Umber."

"You know it wasn't that easy," Clay tried, turning his head back to Umber. "It wasn't our secret to tell."

"Are you fucking serious?!" Flame jumped off of the chair so fast that it slammed against the wall. "What do you mean it 'wasn't that easy'?! Don't you think that it's important to tell me that one of my "*friends"* has the power to literally tear down this whole fucking building with one thought?"

Clay snapped his head toward Flame, tightening his grip around Umber's talons. "What? You *know* Turtle would never do that! Why are you saying things like this? He helped us defeat Darkstalker for moons' sake!"

All animus are the same, Flame thought. *This is what they do, they manipulate you into thinking they're good, just so that they can get close and cast whatever fucking spell they can on you, just like Darkstalker.*

This was a lesson he'd never forget; not after what Darkstalker did to him. The *only* animus he would ever trust is Stonemover, and he wasn't even an animus anymore! Hell, he could hardly even walk!

"How can you trust him?!" Flame asked angrily. "Are you stupid or has he already fucked with your mind and made you his little minion?"

"I can trust him because if he really wanted to do something, he could've easily done it as soon as he realized he was animus!" Clay argued. "Don't you remember how fast Darkstalker acted? Why hasn't he done anythingyet except help if he was the same?"

Flame puckered his lips before opening his mouth as if he was about to say something, but nothing to mind. *Why* hasn't *he done anything yet?* he wondered. *He* seemed *like he cares about me, about Umber, about Moon and Qibli and Kinkajou. But that's probably just another animus trait!*

"I...don't have all the answers, but I *k*nowhe can't be trusted!" Flame declared, looking down at the floor. "Just you wait until he actually does something, and I'll be right." He walked back over to the chair and sat down, staring at the floor.

"I hope you'll trust him eventually because he only wants to help," Clay said. "Not *all* animus are evil." He rested his head on Umber's lap and closed his eyes.

"Whatever," Flame commented, resting his head against the wall and closing his eyes tiredly.

Clay's POV

Clay awoke with a gasp, his heart racing relentlessly. His eyes opened to a pitch black room, but he could still feel his talons in Umber's. The images of his dreams kept flashing through his head, over and over again like the repetitive sound of wingbeats.

As they faded from his memory, though, one thing refused to leave his head: the feeling of his talons against Umber's chest as his heart slowed to a complete stop, the cries of everyone in the room (especially Flame's) and the panic and dread running through him.

As he recovered from the nightmare, he had a realization. *I should've visited more...* Clay thought with a stab of sadness. *I should've prioritized Umber over Jade Mountain. I wish...I wish I could just talk to you one last time.* He felt tears begin to roll down his face as he clenched Umber's talons harder.

He lifted himself up, pushing against Umber a bit for support — not enough to hurt him, but enough to get his weight up. Except he slipped a bit, but thankfully caught himself before crushing Umber.

But his talons landed on his necklace. More specifically, the gem of the necklace. The familiar feel of the smoothened rock, mixed with the tiny micro scratches on it felt similar; similar enough to where his brain immediately landed on the image of a familiar blue gem.

A dreamvisitor.

THAT'S IT! THE DREAMVISITOR! Clay thought as if a candle had just been lit above his head. *I — no —* we *can talk to him again! Just until he...* Clay paused. *Just until Turtle heals him, of course! He said he was working on a new spell; a better spell!*

"Flame," Clay called out, but didn't get a response. "Flame!" he said louder.

"Shut the fuck up!" Flame responded from somewhere in the darkness. "Go back to sleep, it's fucking early!" He heard the chair creak a bit as Flame shifted around.

"I have an idea!" Clay said, giddy excitement running through his veins at just the thought of using the dreamvisitor. "I know how we can talk to Umber!"

There was a moment of silence.

"No," Flame said. "We aren't getting fucking Turtle! Go back to sleep and stop trying to get my hopes up."

"I'm talking about a dreamvisitor!" Clay interrupted. "Sunny still has one back at Jade Mountain!"

There was another moment of silence, "I'll go, I can fly faster," Flame said.

"No, you stay here with Umber." He began feeling his way up the bed and over to the table, being careful not to scratch him on his way up.

"What?! That's bullshit! I can fly faster than you can, so I'll probably be there and back in the next couple of hours!" He blew a tiny plume of flames out of his nose in anger, which lit up the room for a second.

He grabbed the candle and felt his way up before realizing that it had completely burned out, and they were probably stuck in complete darkness until morning.

"Sunny won't just *give* you the dreamvisitor though, especially after you stole it from Starflight," Clay reminded. "She'll give it to me, I know she will." He sighed, hesitating a little. "I would rather you go just as much as you do, but I won't take the chance."

"So let me come with you!" Flame proposed. "Let me fly with you until Jade Mountain, then we can both get the dreamvisitor and I can fly back with it! That, or we can just use the dreamvisitor as soon as Sunny gives it to us!"

Clay considered this for a moment, before coming to a decision. "All of us are going to use the dreamvistor," he said. "We're all using it here, it wouldn't be fair to the others." He began feeling his way back down to Umber, before sitting back down and gripping his talons in his.

"The fuck? 'Wouldn't be fair'?" Flame said angrily. "I'm his boyfriend and you're his brother! We should be the first ones to use it!" The chair creaked more as he quickly stood up.

Now that he thought of it, it *did* make sense for them to be the first ones to use it; he was his brother, and Flame was the love of his

life. *Maybe we'll just use it first* after *I get back from Jade Mountain. I'm sure they'll all understand, right? Flame can go first, then me, then they can all decide upon each other from there.*

"I'm leaving in the morning, and I'll be back in a few hours where we'll *all* use the dreamvisitor." He rested his head back on Umber's lap.

"This is fucking stupid," Flame pouted like a dragonet. The only difference being that most dragonets don't curse like him. He heard the chair smack against the wall as Flame sat back down, muttering curses inaudibly.

All throughout the night, he tried to go to sleep but couldn't shake the constant thought of what might happen if Umber does...pass. It's not like it was something he *wanted* to think about, but his brain kept going in circles about what it would mean for them all, especially Flame.

He'll be even more aggressive I bet... Clay thought. *Maybe even violent if it gets that far.*

He knew the best thing that they could do is to try and be here for him now so that they could possibly cushion his fall if worse comes to worst, and Umber does possibly go into the mud puddle down below — or the mountain up in the sky in Flame's case, if that's really what all SkyWings believed in.

Within a few hours, he could see the sun shining through the window and he still hadn't gotten any sleep ever since he had woken up. Now that it was brighter in the room, he could see that Flame had actually gotten up from the chair without him noticing and was sleeping at the end of Umber's bed.

"Flame," Clay called out. Flame perked his head up from his slumber and stared blankly at him. "I'm leaving now, alright?"

"Hurry up," was all Flame muttered before burying his head back in the blankets.

Clay stood up and walked through the door. *Everyone should be*

downstairs, Clay thought. *At least, that's where they were last night.*

He quietly closed the door behind him. The hallway was only lit by a few windows since none of the candles had been lit yet because just about everyone was away right now.

He made his way through the winding and bending halls, down multiple flights of stairs, and through the familiar two doors before walking into the waiting room, where everyone was sound asleep.

He had to admit, it *did* look odd for so many different tribes to be asleep next to each other, especially when just about this whole kingdom was filled to the brim with SkyWings.

He carefully walked up to Moon and tapped her on the shoulder. Ever since the other day, she had been wearing Qibli's pouch, likely to protect her from any lingering thoughts.

"Hey, Moon," Clay whispered, shaking her a little.

"Huh?" Moon said groggily as she awoke. "Oh, hey Clay," she mumbled.

"I'm going back to Jade Mountain to get Sunny's dreamvisitor, and I need you to gather everyone outside of Umber's room in a few hours for when I get back."

Moon quickly awoke at the word, nearly waking Qibli up who was soundly sleeping on her shoulder. "A dreamvisitor? You mean..."

"Yeah, we're going to talk to Umber," Clay explained. "Anyways, I've got to go, I'll be back in a few hours. Be ready when I get back." He began swiftly walking over to the door, excitement flooding his veins at the thought of the dreamvisitor.

"Qibli, wake up," Moon whispered as Clay walked through the door, their chattering voices disappearing behind him.

As he took his first step outside, the early morning sunlight and cool air beamed against his scales for the first time in what felt like years. He had been in that hospital for the last four days, only stepping outside to send a few letters back to the Jade Academy, or

checking up on Peril.

I have to get that dreamvisitor, and I have to do it quickly, Umber is waiting on us, Clay thought. *But first...*

He looked around, keeping his eyes on lookout for a certain SkyWing.

He looked all around the hospital, under a few bridges, and even in the water before eventually finding her sitting atop a hill nearby, the grass all around her burnt to a crisp along with talonprints leading up to her.

His talons slammed into the grass as he landed, furdling his wings back in. Peril — who was sleeping — immediately jolted awake and looked up at him.

"HEY! DON'T-," she started before realizing who she was looking at. "Oh, hey Clay!" Her panicked expression immediately changed to delight as a smile formed across her face.

"Hey, Peril," Clay greeted. "How're you doing out here? I mean, it must be horrible to have to sit up here, right? Because of all of the dragons staring at you and everything."

"Oh, it's fine," Peril assured, taking a casual step toward him. "I've gotten used to it after the last couple years. Besides, most of them are too scared of me to look at me anyways," she joked. "...So, how have you been? Is Umber doing any better?" she asked comfortingly.

"No..." he said lowly, his head falling to look at the grass below. "He's exactly the same as when we first got here: asleep and covered head to talon in bandages."

"Aw, I'm sorry. I'm sure he'll wake up soon though," Peril said reassuringly.

She took another step forward. They were only mere inches apart now, and for any other dragon, this would probably be setting alarm bells off in their head and they would run away in fear of her flaming touch. Except those dragons didn't have fireproof scales like

he did.

She leaned in for a hug, and orange scales met brown as he graciously accepted. Strangely, the warmth from her scales was comforting — more comforting than it usually was. As she wrapped her wings their full length around him, it felt like being tucked into a warm blanket during the winter next to a fireplace.

This must be what Umber felt like every time Flame hugs him, Clay thought with a stab of remorse.

They stayed like that for the next few minutes before Clay pulled away. Not because he wanted to, but because he had to, his fireproof scales were starting to become less fireproof than before.

"Hey, Peril," Clay said softly. "I'm going to Jade Mountain to get Sunny's dreamvisitor, and I'll be back in a few hours. We can all talk to Umber when I get back."

He saw a slight frown begin to form on her face as she looked down at the ground.

He took his talons underneath her chin and lifted her head up to look at him. "No, Peril. *All* of us, including you."

"But...I'll melt it," Peril reminded, her voice low and saddened.

"We have a SeaWing animus, remember?" Clay recalled, taking his talons off of her chin. "We can get Turtle to enchant it or something." Peril's face immediately perked up at the mention of that.

"Oh...I guess I forgot about that part," she said with a light laugh. She looked up at him with a smile, her scales radiating in the sunlight as she glared at him. "I guess it just slipped out of my...my mind..." her voice lowered as they both got lost in each other's gaze

Then, time stopped as they locked eyes. From her steaming scales, to the way she laughed, to the way she smiled was beautiful — too beautiful even. It was almost scary to think how close Scarlet came to taking this away from him.

He could feel his heart begin to beat through his chest as he smiled, their faces inching closer, until the distance closed and their lips met.

For the few seconds that their lips mingled, they both rested their talons on each other's shoulders, pulling them both in closer. Clay wished he could stay like this forever, cursed to eternally kiss Peril. But he knew he had to get that dreamvisitor soon, so he reluctantly pulled away.

"I'll be back soon, alright?" Clay said softly, running his talon down her cheek. "Before you even realize I was gone."

Peril smiled. "I'll be waiting."

He launched himself in the air, flapping his wings as hard as he could; or until they almost gave out and he nearly fell straight out of the sky. He had to take a twenty minute long break, before the shakiness in his wings completely went away.

He didn't know how long he had been flying, his brain wasn't keeping track of time too much; it was too busy thinking about that dream he had of Umber, and how scared he realized he was about it becoming a reality.

He had only known his brother for just a few short years, and he was already about to be taken away. Taken away just like Crane had been while he was trapped under Scarlet's grasp.

Finally, though, he saw Jade Mountain in the distance, and it only took a few more minutes of flying as hard as he could before he landed at the cave entrance.

Classes were just starting, and many dragons were scurrying the halls on their way to their class. A few of them looked at him excitedly, before rushing over to wherever they needed to go.

He inhaled deeply, before taking his first step in. It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the inside since it was far darker here than outside; the halls were only lit by a few candles and windows.

The cool cave air began cooling his scales after a long while of flying, and he couldn't help but feel relieved; even after everything he's gone through in the last couple of days.

He didn't have time to relax though, he needed to find Sunny and get the dreamvisitor quickly. Sunny didn't teach any classes at this time, so he knew that she was either in one of the study rooms helping out a few of the students, or in the library helping Starflight organize scrolls.

Alright, library or study room, Clay tried to decide. But Sunny usually did both of these things equally, so it was a coin flip. *Calm down Clay, it's not like Umber will die because of that extra couple minutes*, he tried to reassure himself. Though it hardly worked because he felt even more anxious now that he put that thought back in his head.

He decided to go to the library because if it turns out that she wasn't in the study room OR library, then at least Starflight would know where she went.

So he began walking through the crowded cave, through every turn and bend, until he finally made it to the library. Starflight was sitting at his desk — as usual — , and there was no sign of Sunny anywhere in here. There *were* a few dragonets reading though, who mostly perked their heads up past their scrolls to look at him.

"Clay? Is that you?" Starflight blinked and shifted himself forward. "Is Umber okay?"

"Uhm...no," Clay admitted. "Turtle's-" he looked over at the dragonets. "That *thing* from before didn't work..." He looked down at the cave floor awkwardly. He

"You mean...oh...I'm so sorry," Starflight said sympathetically. He sunk back into his chair and frowned during the pause. "So uh, why aren't you back at the hospital with him right now, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I need Sunny's dreamvisitor," Clay explained. "They're putting him under every few hours, so he's probably sleeping right now." He

walked a few steps further into the room. The reading dragonets were eyeing him down at this point, mixes of curiosity and sympathy spreading across their faces.

He imagined that Tsunami had probably told a few of the other teachers and classes that he was leaving. Maybe she didn't tell them the specifics of it? Which was possibly a blessing and a curse at the same time. On one talon, he didn't need dragons constantly bombarding him with sympathy. But on the other talon, he didn't need dragons

"That's...wow. I mean, it must be horrible to see him like that. Are you okay? If you want, I can get one of our therapy teachers down here." He gripped the wooden desk with his talons.

"No, no, that's alright, Starflight," Clay dismissed. "Besides, I'm not the one who needs something like that anyways, that's Flame. He isn't taking this whole thing very well." He sighed as he heard Flame's screams shoot through his mind.

GET THE FUCK OUT! ALL OF YOU, GET THE FUCK OUT RIGHT NOW! his mind echoed

"...Which reminds me, do you know where Sunny is?"

"Sunny? She was just in here a few minutes ago," Starflight explained. "I think she said something about filling in one of your classes?"

Oh moons! Clay thought. *Now I have other dragons filling in my classes for me!*

He sighed. "Alright, thanks." He turned around to walk out of the library.

"Clay, wait," Starflight called out, immediately stopping him in his tracks, and he turned his head back. "Umber will be fine, you know that right? I mean, you have Tu- uh...that *other thing* to make sure of it."

"Yeah...I guess," Clay said, continuing through the door. Though, he was putting up a façade. As much as he wanted Umber to live, his

hope was starting to run thin. Every day he only seemed to get worse, not better. And that was obviously affecting Flame, too.

He tried to remember what class he would be teaching now. *History? No, that's next period I think. Maybe art? I don't think I'm teaching that today.* So he began scrolling through his mental list of every class he had and on what days. *Oh, wait! I'm teaching Dragon today.*

So he started running through the halls — which were empty now — until he finally made it to the entrance. He could see his full class of students sitting down and boringly listening to Sunny speak.

He walked through the door and immediately, everyone looked over at him in surprise, especially Sunny.

"Clay?!" Sunny said in surprise, jumping from her stand and rushing over to him. "What are you doing here? You should be back at the Sky Kingdom with Umber!"

"Sunny, can you come out in the hall for a minute? We need to talk," Clay beckoned as he walked through the door.

"Yeah, of course, sure!" Sunny said.

"Oooooo, she's in troubleeee," one of the dragonets said.

Once they were out in the hall, he led them both down more so that he was sure that nobody could hear them. It was fairly dark down here, but that was basically every hall that had unused rooms.

"Sunny, I need the dreamvisitor," Clay said. "Umber's constantly asleep, so it's the only way we can all talk to him. I know you're probably going to say no and-"

"Of course!" Sunny said hurriedly, reaching into the pouch around her neck. After a few seconds of rummaging, she pulled out a shiny blue gem that shined brightly even when there was no light. "Here, take it!"

"What? Just like that?" Clay tilted his head confusedly.

"Yeah! Why would I deny you seeing your brother?" Sunny questioned. "Clay, I grew up with you, of course I'd give you some lousy rock if it meant that you could talk to him again!"

She dropped the dreamvisitor in his talons, and he could already feel the power surging through it, just like when he used it the first time to warn the MudWing soldiers. "Moons, thank you so much!" Clay thanked, wrapping his arms around her and giving her a great big bear hug. "I'll give it back as soon as we're done with it, alright?"

"No, that's fine," Sunny said. "Keep it for now, just until Umber recovers. Also, you're crushing me just a tad."

"Oh, sorry," Clay apologized. "Well, I've got to go then, alright? I'll see you in a few days hopefully!"

Without even looking back, he began sprinting as fast as he could through the halls, tightly gripping the dreamvisitor in his talons, excitement running through him all the while. The kind of excitement you get when you first wake up in the morning and get to the last cow in the Prey Center before anyone else.

Once he got outside, he threw himself off of the edge and spread his wings, and flapped as hard and fast as he could.

Author's note: Another late upload, sorry haha. I had a couple finals this week that I needed to study for, but school is officially out for me now! Hopefully, this means that writing will be a lot easier from here on out, but no promises because uploading weekly like this is challenging, regardless of school or not.

PS: I think the next chapter will give everyone (including me) a nice break from all of the depressing stuff going on.

Chapter 19

TW: Slight Gore

Flame's POV

Clay had left hours ago, and Flame had been staring into Umber's eyes for...he didn't know how long actually, his mind was stuck thinking about all the things he wanted to tell him.

Would he be mad about what he did to Turtle? Surely not, especially once he realizes that he had saved him from a potential spell that would screw with his brain. He was sure everything would come to him in the moment though, and he probably wouldn't have time to tell him all about that as he buried him deep in a hug.

If only I was faster... Flame thought. *If only I didn't rely on USELESS FUCKING DRAGON'S HELP!* He could feel the familiar feel of rage brewing inside him as he went back and thought of setting every single one of them on fire, so they went through something similar as Umber.

That scene kept replaying in his head though, and all of the things he could've done differently — faster, even — stood out like a sore talon now that he was keeping an eye out.

I could've ran faster... I could've gotten away from those healers quicker... I could've realized sooner that nobody was going to help... Flame thought, tears forming in his eyes. *Maybe I should've left him in there. Maybe he's just suffering more than he would've, and he's going to die no matter what...*

As much as it hurt to think about, it was starting to seem like a very real possibility. Umber's burns haven't been getting any better, even with the shots and the cream they had rubbed on him every now and again.

The cream had certainly worked with him, since he was able to take his bandages off completely this morning with almost no scar to show for it. Except for a few tiny spots where the burns were especially bad, which not even the magical cream could fix.

The healer's wrong though! Flame yelled at himself. *Umber* will *live. He'll be able to be woken up soon, and then we can go back home and read graphicolls and make food or whatever he wants to do! ...Right?* He squeezed Umber's talons in his.

Everything fell silent as he cleared his mind and rested his head on Umber's chest, listening to the rhythmic beating of his heart. Strangely, it brought him a weird peace listening to it, maybe because it showed that his body was still fighting?

But almost like a sixth sense, his ears picked up the specific sound of heavy talons clacking down the hall, as if someone was running. Even though there were far more than just one, his brain specifically picked up on these specific ones more than of the others.

He poked his head up and strained his ears.

Then, he heard them stop in front of the door, followed by the doorknob twisting and the door swinging open, where a familiar massive brown dragon stood, holding a familiar shiny blue gem in his talons. His expression was full of excitement and there was a massive smile formed from ear to ear.

His wings were shaking with exhaustion and he looked like he could hardly stand up from the way his knees bent.

"I have it!" Clay panted. Flame could see the light peeking out from underneath his enclosed talons. "I have the dreamvisitor!"

Behind him, he could see Moon, Kinkajou, Qibli, Zephyr, Sora, Jet, and even Turvar. But the dragon that stood out most to him was Turtle. He looked innocent enough, but Flame knew that there *had* to be a monster behind that disguise — façade, even.

"Oh, no!" Flame shook his head and shot a stare at Turtle, who took

a step back. "No, no, no, no, no! You are not seeing Umber!"

"Flame, we aren't doing this right now!" Kinkajou interjected. "*ALL* of us are seeing Umber, whether you like it or not!"

"Fuck no!" Flame retorted. "He's the only one who doesn't get to see Umber, he'll do something to him, I just know it! LIke, seriously, how can you all possibly trust him?!" He took a step closer, his anger bubbling up.

Turtle just looked nervous — as usual. Too nervous for an animus that could easily just rip him in half if he really wanted to, and then make everyone forget about his existence entirely. *Maybe, just maybe, with the smallest possible chance, he might not actually want to hurt anyone? Shouldn't he be completely fearless? Or is this just part of his grand plan to fuck up everything?*

"Well for starters, he saved Winter's life!" Qibli interjected. "Actually, he saved all of our lives! Y'know, from the evil animus that tried to kill us all a couple years ago?"

"That's just a part of his plan! He'll get close, and then stab you in the back just like every other animus!" Flame argued.

"And Stonemover?" Qibli challenged. "If all animus are so evil, then why did Stonemover lock himself away in a cave for years, and outright refuse to leave? Was getting rid of his magic all a part of *his* evil plan too?"

He's different though! Flame thought. *He was used by the NightWings! Of course he wouldn't want his power!*

"That's different!" Flame argued. "He never wantedto be animus in the first place!"

"But he's still animus, right?" Qibli retorted. "If *all* animus are evil, then shouldn't he be busy destroying Pyrrhia or something right now? What about Anemone?"

Qibli had just used his own logic against him — which wasn't entirely unexpected, but that didn't mean he liked it. *But...* He tried wrapping his head around it, but couldn't perform the mental

gymnastics he needed. But for Anemone, that was easy since she was merely a dragonet.

"Okay, maybe not ALL animus are evil, but that's a nine out of ten scenario! Stonemover is the *one* exception!" Flame tried.

"So what about Anemone? Are we just ignoring the fact that she hasn't done anything evil recently?" Flame could feel his anger rising, slamming against his chest like a dam about to break.

"Oh my fucking moons Qibli, SHE'S FIVE! What the fuck can she do?!" Flame yelled.

"Yeah! And so was Turtle when we took down Darkstalker! She's capable enough to use her magic!"

Gah! This whole argument is fucking stupid! Flame thought in a fit of rage.

"Okay, whatever! You win! Now shut the fuck up so I can dreamvisit Umber already!" he yelled angrily, snatching the gem out of Clay's talons and turning toward Umber. Clay jumped a little as he grabbed it, but that could've just been his shakiness from the fly back.

"This *doesn't* mean I trust you either, Turtle. It just means that I'm done with this shitty argument." He walked over to Umber and sat down by his side, and put the dreamvisitor up to his forehead.

But the anger from the argument before kept coming back, and he couldn't focus on Umber clearly with Turtle constantly popping in his mind. He knew he wouldn't be able to properly dreamvisit until he calmed down, but how could he when he's in a room full of dragons he hates?

He heard the door shut as everyone walked in and sat down, though he didn't necessarily care as long as Turtle stayed away from Umber, and he kept the dreamvisitor glued to his forehead.

I need a way to calm down already, dammit! Flame thought.

So, he began relentlessly digging through his memories for

something — anything that he could use to calm himself down, until his mind landed on a happy memory; a fresh happy memory at that.

He pushed his talons up against the fabric of the bandage, making sure it was secure against Umber's scales.

"Alright, done," Flame said. There was a pause. "Does...it still hurt?" he asked hesitantly, unsure he would be able to hear the answer without another outburst of anger.

"It's a little sore around the edges but only hurts when you touch it," Umber informed.

Flame could feel his face begin to turn red, and he swore he remembered the feeling of smoke coming from his nose. But with a stroke of luck, he remembered a technique that Starf had taught him. That technique was some stupid "Control your breathing" bullshit that he thought would never work on him

Obviously Umber saw the look on his face when he said this though, because he quickly spoke up, interrupting his counting "But it doesn't hurt that much though!" he quickly blurted. "It's nothing, really!"

Ten... Flame thought in the real world, taking deep, calming breaths.

"No, it's fine," Flame said softly. "I'm calm," he reassured himself.

Nine...

Flame could see Umber's brow rise in surprise and that gave him a feeling in his chest that he could only describe as a mix of happiness and pride, and he felt a smile form on his face with delight.

Eight...

This technique is something he usually ignored whenever he was told to do this in the past, but the desperation he had to not lose control in front of Umber again outweighed his stubbornness of the techniques he thought never worked.

Seven...

"How about we go read now?" Flame said. "We still have a while before we have to leave." Umber smiled, his face lighting up the room like the sun through the window.

Six...

Then, another memory popped in his head. One that highlighted how happy he was when he was with Umber, and just thinking about it brought him a figment of that same happiness as if he was experiencing it all over again second talon.

"*So this is our new house?" Umber asked excitedly as he ran his talon down the wall.*

"*Yep! All we have to do is get some furniture now," Flame said. "It's a little small, but now we get to live together!"*

Five...

"*I love it!" Umber exclaimed as he threw himself in Flame's arms. "Oh! We could probably put a nice big table over in that corner so we can read all of your graphicolls!"*

"Our *graphicolls," Flame corrected.*

Four...

Then another...

"*Come on, MudWing!" Flame called out as he flapped his wings. "Keep up before I leave you behind!"*

"I can't!" Umber yelled from a distance. "How is a MudWing supposed to keep up with a SkyWing when he's flying so fast?"

Three...

And another...

"*Just- Justi..." Umber tried, his talon seemingly stuck under the word as*

if the ink was a magnet and his talon was made of metal. He tried sounding it out for a few more seconds before looking over at Flame for the answer.

"*Justifiable," Flame said.*

"*These words are always so hard!" Umber complained. "But at least I have the smartest SkyWing in all of Pyrrhia to help me." He shot a smile at Flame and cuddled closer, resting his head on his shoulder.*

Two...

"*Aw, don't flatter me," Flame said. "I'm sure there's another, better SkyWing out there."*

"Flame! Stop saying that!" Umber scolded. "I couldn't ask for a better SkyWing in my life!" He looked up at Flame with a smile, his warm glare making him want to cuddle him closer.

One...

"*I love you Flame, and no other SkyWing is ever going to change that."*

He jolted his eyes open to see the open sky around him, before quickly realizing that he wasn't on solid ground. He took his wings out as fast as he could. He was a bit disorientated after the sudden jump between realities, but he could still tell up from down *just* enough to right himself.

He looked down at the ground in an attempt to figure out where he was.

The grass was greener over here, with few trees and a big, muddy swamp far, far into the distance. So far that he could hardly even see it past the usual fog.

The sky was bright and sunny with only a few clouds in view, but beautiful nonetheless.

We're near the Mud Kingdom, Flame thought. *So where's Umber? Is he flying with his sibs or something?*

He looked around for the next minute, and almost gave up hope until he spotted light blue, silver, and pale blue scales in the distance. Most of them were holding spears, but there were a couple swords amongst them. But something was still off about this sight because why would IceWings fly all the way over to the Mud Kingdom?

Taking a closer look at the crowd of IceWings, he spotted something that sent a shiver down his spine. Different shades of brown scales mixed in near the center of the crowd, as if they were being surrounded. And one of them, he recognized clearly: it was Umber — Umber and his sibs.

He was holding a spear and was covered in heavy looking metal armor, constantly shooting his head left and right and jabbing his spear at the air.

He looked...scared, which was weird for Umber because he was almost never scared. Even on his potential deathbed he looked like he was at peace, which was comforting and scary at the same time.

Then, he figured out what was going on. *They are being surrounded... Umber and his sibs are surrounded by IceWings with spears and swords. This is war.*

Without hesitation, he shot himself forward and began flying at Umber as fast as he possibly could. It didn't take too long for him to get there, but now that he was close he could see something even more odd than this whole dream.

There were six dragons in the group, and Clay wasn't one of them. Umber never talked about Crane too much, but he did know she died only a few days before Clay escaped the Sky Kingdom by Icicle's talons.

"Get the fuck away from him!" Flame yelled as he clawed at the nearest IceWing. He had a straight shot right at their throat, and they hardly reacted to his yelling, so he was sure he was about to land a perfect shot.

But instead of opening a fresh cut, his talons just phased directly

through. Though he could still feel the iciness of their scales, his talons made no real contact with them.

"What the fuck?" Flame said aloud. "Did you even hear me? Get the fuck away from him!" He tried clawing the IceWing again, but only had the same result.

He built up fire in the back of his throat, and blew it as hard as he could at the IceWing, lighting up the sky with all varieties of reds and oranges. Except when the blinding light faded, they didn't even seem phased by it.

He looked over at Umber, expecting some sort of hopeful look on his face as he stared at him with excitement, but was only met with the same panicked and saddened face from before.

"Umber!" Flame called out, zipping past all of the IceWing guards and flying toward him. "I'm here! I'm right here! It's really..." he trailed off. Umber didn't seem phased by him either, just like the IceWing from before.

Why isn't he reacting? Is he blind or something? Why does it seem like he can't see me? Flame thought. *Wait...can he see me?* He waved his talons in his face, but Umber just kept looking around in fear.

He can't... Flame realized. *The only way that's possible is if...is if he's having a nightmare... But why would he be having a nightmare about the war?* Flame wondered. *Sure, a lot of crazy, traumatizing shit happens, but Umber never seemed so bothered by it that he'd have dreams about it, especially years later.*

He looked around at the six MudWings, paying close attention to Crane. *Unless...something happens here. Something so horrific that he's still haunted by it after all this time.*

Taking a closer look at Crane, he could definitely see the similarities between her and Umber, and it was almost frightening. Crane was a little bigger than Umber with slightly thinner and longer horns, and a slim face and body comparable to Sora's.

"Stay calm and remember your training!" Reed yelled. "Stay in

position and cover each other!"

Then, his heart jumped as he saw an IceWing lunge at Umber as he looked over at Reed. He instinctively flung himself around Umber, but only phased directly through him and fell forward, but caught himself only a few seconds later.

"UMBER!" he screamed, whipping his body back around. But that IceWing from before wasn't there, and Umber was unharmed. Obviously shaken up, but unharmed nonetheless. He had his talons covering his face as he braced for the impact that never came.

After a few seconds, he lifted his talons out from in front of his eyes, and quickly glanced at everything around him. He was rubbing his talons all over his body, sure that there had to be some sort of nick or stab that he wasn't feeling yet.

But he had been so focused on Umber that he had completely ignored *what* had saved him in the first place.

Looking past Umber, he could see brown scales brawling with white, both landing a few hits and scratches over the next few seconds. Until one of them made a mistake, and ended up in the other's talons in a headlock almost instantly.

Now that he could clearly see both of their faces, he recognized both of them immediately. It was Icicle and Crane, and Crane had just lost the fight that meant her life.

As they both hovered there, Crane struggled, jabbing her elbows and kicking her legs at Icicle. Until, with one clean slice, Icicle slid her talons across Crane's throat and she let out one last gurgle as blood started pouring from it, Icicle wearing a big smile on her face all the while.

"Holy fuck!" Flame exclaimed as he covered his eyes with his talons. Though he couldn't see it anymore, the image was still buried deep inside of his mind and that last lowly gurgle from Crane made him want to vomit.

"C-Crane...?" Umber muttered. Even though he couldn't see his face,

he could tell that he was crying just by the way his voice shook.

Holy fuck holy fuck holy fuck I did not just watch that, Flame thought in a panic.

He always imagined the scene to be bad, but not *THIS* bad. Actually, bad was an understatement, it was horrifying. Even though he didn't know Crane like Umber did, every ounce of his body hated this probably just as much as Umber did.

"Now's our chance!" Reed yelled "Retreat!"

As soon as he said it, Reed bolted toward the ground, furling his wings back in and hurling himself to a freefall. Then Marsh, then Sora, then Pheasant, until the only ones left were him, Umber, and Crane along with all of the IceWing soldiers.

But Umber didn't go down with them, and just stayed there in complete shock at what had just happened.

Then, Icicle dropped Crane, leaving her to freefall out of the sky, and Umber followed. Except he didn't look like how a dragon normally did when they freefalled; his back was turned toward the ground and his arms and wings were freely flapping around.

"NO!" Flame screamed as he turned himself downward and chased down after Umber desperately.

As they fell, the sky and ground around them disappeared and slowly faded into a black abyss, where every sound echoed in the seemingly infinite void. He looked around in confusion, before looking back down at Umber and snapping his focus back on him.

Now, they were only mere inches apart, and Flame's talons were hardly centimeters away from Umber's, when all of a sudden they splashed down into a pool of red liquid that reeked of iron.

He hit the bottom of it almost instantly, except there was no pain. Actually, he felt no need to breathe either. It was like he could hold his breath under...whatever this stuff was forever, just like a SeaWing could.

He stood up and looked over at Umber who was already standing up and had the strange red liquid staining his scales. "No no no no no! Not again!" he cried.

"Umber, can you hear me?! No what? Has this happened before?!" Flame tried, yet his calls still went unheard as Umber looked at the pitch black sky, as if he was expecting something to fall out of it.

And that's exactly what happened. After a few seconds of Flame treading his way through the thick red liquid, desperately trying to get to Umber, something else splashed down once he got close, sending even more of it to splash all over him and Umber.

"Please don't..." Umber muttered, tears falling down his eyes and dripping into the pool with a quiet splash that echoed throughout the void. "Please, please don't!"

"Umber..." a new voice said, one that he's never heard before.

"No!" Umber cried, looking the opposite direction and turning toward Flame, sealing his eyes shut tightly. "Go away! This isn't real, none of this is real!" his voice echoed.

As the ripples of water calmed down, he looked past Umber and saw the familiar face of Crane. She was laying down and looking up at the endless black sky, her eyes glazed over with a big red cut on her neck that drained into the pool and disappeared as it blended in. With this, Flame finally realized that they were both standing in a big, endless pool of blood.

The blood was covering almost her whole body as she spoke in gentle wheezes and coughed up blood every now and again.

"Umber...why didn't you save me?" Crane asked. Umber's face immediately perked up and he shot his eyes open, a light gasp leaving him at the same time. It was almost as if he was surprised — like he was expecting her to say something different.

"W-What?" Umber asked confusedly. "W-What are you talking about?"

"You could've saved me, but instead you sat there and did nothing."

Her voice began to raise. "We would have both made it out alive if only you did something instead of sit there and do nothing!" her voice raised, as if she was getting angry.

The sudden outburst from Crane sent a shiver down Flame's spine, even more so knowing that Umber's mind was doing all of this to himself. Was it to torment him? Punish him? Or did he really blame himself for Crane's death?

"I-I didn't- I thought..." Umber tried, turning around to look at her.

"YOU THOUGHT WHAT? THAT YOUR LIFE WAS MORE IMPORTANT THAN MINE?" Crane screamed. "YOU CAN'T EVEN DEFEND YOURSELF AGAINST A SKYWING AND YOU THINK THAT YOU'RE MORE IMPORTANT?! IT SHOULD'VE BEEN YOU! YOU SHOULD'VE BEEN THE ONE TO DIE, NOT ME!"

"I tried...I really did! I couldn't do anything-"

"WILL YOU SHUT THE FUCK UP AND STOP MAKING EXCUSES?! YOU'RE USELESS! I WISH ICICLE WOULD'VE IGNORED ME AND WENT STRAIGHT FOR YOU! AND SO DOES REED, SORA,"

"No, stop it! Please!"

"...MARSH, AND PHEASANT! I SHOULD'VE LET HER KILL YOU WHILE I HAD THE CHANCE!"

"Stop it!"

"IF I WAS STILL ALIVE RIGHT NOW, I WOULD-"

"I SAID STOP!" Umber cried, sending a shockwave of pain and regret around him. Flame was left there, shocked by the pure amount of agony in his words. He had never heard Umber yell with such pain in his voice before, let alone raise his voice in the first place.

He collapsed into the pool of blood as he covered himself with his wings, his sobs echoing throughout the room, each cry making Flame's heart ache just a little more than before.

Umber...you should've said something, Flame thought sympathetically. *We could've worked through this together!*

As the echoes of his outburst began to fade, white splotches started appearing on the black wall, much like a RainWing when you scared them. They eventually grew and grew, until the black void was completely tuned out and it left a blank white room while the blood slowly drained.

Crane — or, fake Crane — had disappeared sometime during Umber's scream and the changing walls around them.

Even though the blood was gone, there was still some stuck to their scales that dripped on the floor.

Umber continued weeping on his talons and knees, completely ignoring what he had just done to the environment around them.

"U-Umber?" Flame called out, expecting nothing but a saddened weep as a response.

But to his surprise, Umber jolted his head up and furled his wings back in, flipping his head around to look at him. "Flame?" He paused. "N-No, this is just another stupid trick! Go away!" he sniffled, turning his head away.

Flame frowned. Not because he told him to go away, but because he was so accustomed to his mind toying with him that he immediately thought it was fake, no questions asked. *A week...* Flame thought. *He's been going through this for a week...*

"N-No Umber, I'm real! It's really me!" Flame tried.

"That's what you said last time, and the time before that, and the time before that, and the time before that!" Umber said, pain surging through his voice with each word.

He walked over to Umber, each step leaving a bloody talonprint on the white floor, before laying down next to him. "I'm using a dreamvisitor, Umber," he explained, wrapping one of his wings around him. "We're all here. Sora, Jet, Zephyr, Moon, Qibli, Kinkajou, Clay, Peril, Turvar, and...Turtle."

Untrustworthy fucker, Flame thought. *He's probably the one doing this to Umber!*

"But Reed, Marsh, Pheasant, Mom, Chromis, and Shrimp should be here any day now, Tsunami must've sent a letter or something."

Umber looked over at him blankly, tears streaming down his face. "That's how I know this is fake..." Umber said disappointedly. "You can't possibly know who Turvar is, I never told you about him. I had a little hope there for a minute that you were actually here." His voice was low and saddened, as if the little bit of happiness he had left was ripped away.

He knows Turvar? How?

"What? You know Turvar?" Flame asked confusedly.

"He saved me from that SkyWing, the day before our anniversary." He sighed. "Moons, what am I even doing? I'm just talking to myself here." He shifted away, but Flame kept his wing firmly in place. He wasn't going to let Umber slip away from him, not again.

Not ever again.

"He saved us from the fire," Flame explained. "He came in with this weird fucking animus gem thing and got us out. Both of us! C'mon Umber, you have to believe I'm actually here! Please!"

Umber looked at him with a look of surprise, as if this was the first bit of affection he's gotten all week, before his face reverted back. "No...it can't be you," he denied. "That dreamvisitor is all the way back at Jade Mountain with Sunny."

"Clay got it, I swear!" Flame said. "He just got back with it! The first thing I did was dreamvisit you!" hr tried. "What can I do to prove to you that I'm really here?"

Umber paused, thinking of a question. "Fine, then tell me. What is my hatching day?"

Uh oh, Flame panicked. *When is his hatching day? June? No, September? Or was it August? October? Oh fuck...*

"Uhm...November...?" Flame guessed with a panic.

"Flame, it is you!" Umber said happily. WIthin a fraction of a second, he twisted around and hugged Flame, sending them both rolling before Umber landed on top of him. His grasp never faltered all throughout their roll though, and he stayed close. "I missed you so much!"

"I got that right?" Flame questioned.

"No! Of course not! My hatching day is in July! Only the real Flame would forget it!" Umber cried happily.

Umber dug his snout into Flame's shoulder, tears violently dripping down Umber's face. He couldn't help but feel a smile form on his, his heart racing with glee as the warmth of Umber's scales met his at least one last time.

Flame wrapped his wings their full length around Umber, pulling him in tightly. "I missed you too," he said softly, a lowly tear running down his face. "I've missed you so so so so much!"

They lay there for the next couple of minutes, intertwining their tails and enjoying the time they had together. Flame never knew how much he truly craved the feeling of Umber's talons against his back, or the feeling of pulling him close with his wings until just now.

Shy tears left Flame's eyes all the while, until finally, Umber lifted his head up and stared directly down at Flame. In that short moment, his shoulder craved for more of his warmth, but that need was quickly drowned out by the feeling of Umber's lips meeting his, and he could practically feel how desperate Umber was to feel loved again.

Flame graciously accepted, and they kissed for the next few minutes, momentarily stopping to breathe — which was odd, because he didn't feel the need to while he was under that pool of blood.

But eventually, Flame reluctantly pulled away, a burning question

plaguing his mind the whole time, partly ruining the whole experience.

"What happened?" Umber asked. "Are you okay?" He tried to kiss him again, but Flame denied it this time, which obviously took Umber by surprise by his shocked expression.

"No, no, no, no, stop!" Flame said. "No I'm not okay! I need you to tell me...what happened back there? What was all of that about?" he asked softly.

"What do you mean?" Umber asked, obviously knowing what Flame was talking about.

"Crane getting her throat slit trying to save you? Her screaming at you that you should've been the one to die?" Flame said, trying as hard as he could to not come off aggressive. "Is this what you were going to tell me about? Was this the nightmare you had at the beach? Is this...really how you feel?"

"I-...uh. I-I, um," Umber stammered, breaking eye contact and looking away guiltily at the surrounding floor. "Yes..." he admitted lowly.

Flame grabbed Umber's face, and forcefully steered it to look him in the eyes. "Umber, look at me!" Umber tried to bob his head away, before Flame turned it back again. "No, look at me! Crane saved your life for a reason! It wasn't your fault! I saw the whole thing, and there was nothing you could do there, even if you weren't starstruck by shock!"

Umber's face began raining tears, splashes of them dripping onto Flame. He jerked his head away and smacked Flame's talons as he closed his eyes, getting up from above Flame and turning around. "No! It was my fault!" Umber cried. "I could've saved her — could've done anything except sit there and watch as she died! *I* was the one Icicle was going for, not her! *I* should've been the one to die, she hardly deserved it! *I* SHOULDN'T EVEN BE ALIVE RIGHT NOW, BUT BY SOME TWISTED FATE I AM, AND I HATE MYSELF FOR IT MORE EVERY SECOND!"

Flame — who still lay on his back — was taken aback; shocked; at a loss for words. Is this really what he wanted? Was Crane's death this hard on him? Or was it the dream that brought all of these feelings back after he had finally gotten rid of them?

"...Umber, I-..." Flame tried, but his words were taken before he could speak them.

He stood up, and walked over to Umber, who was sobbing a few feet away from him, and wrapped his wing around him gently. Not hard though like he usually did whenever he wanted him closer, but he tucked his head away from Flame's view regardless.

"Is this what this whole thing is about? You *wanted* to die in that building, didn't you?" Flame asked sympathetically, his words soft and comforting even for Umber's standard.

"Of course it is!" Umber sobbed. "Sacrificing myself for you was the only way I'd ever be able to make it up to her!" He tried to pull away from his wing, but Flame pulled him back in but tighter this time and he didn't put up much of a fight.

I'm so sorry, Umber, Flame thought.

"I-I had no idea it was that bad... We could've — *should've* talked about this sooner, but I didn't want to push you. I'm so sorry."

Umber jolted his head around to look at him, nearly smacking him with his snout. "No! Don't apologize to me! This was my choice, not yours! Especially since this was all me in the first place! I don't even know why you'd think that! *I* should be the one-"

Flame interrupted him by bringing him into a great big hug, tears rolling uncontrollably down his face as his talons clenched his back. Maybe if he just held him enough, he would magically heal as if nothing happened.

"Umber, I can't lose you!" Flame sobbed. "Y-You're the best thing that's ever happened in my life, and everything feels like it's falling apart now that you're gone! Please don't leave, don't you dare fucking rise to that mountain in the sky! Not without me!"

Umber, still crying, wrapped his arms around Flame as well after a few seconds, clutching equally as hard as he realized what he had been putting him through. "I-I'm so sorry..." he apologized. "It was so stupid and selfish of me, and I never stopped to think how you would feel once I was gone!" He buried his face in Flame's shoulder, more tears pouring from his eyes. "I want to live; to be with you! I'm sorry!"

For the next twenty minutes, they lay there, glued to each other unrelentingly and refusing to let go. If it were up to Flame, he would stay in that dream forever, but there was a strange lingering feeling he was desperately trying to ignore. But as time passed, the dream started to get more and more blurry, until he could feel something was wrong.

"U-Umber?" Flame said confusedly as he pushed away. He looked down. At his talons, the white floor visible through his claws.

"Flame? What's happening?! Why are you all clear like that?!" Umber asked in a panic.

"I-I don't know! The dreamvisitor must be stopping or something!" Flame guessed in an equal panic. "I'll dreamvisit as soon as I can, alright? Whatever nightmare you're going through, I'll pull you out of it, I swear!"

He threw himself back around Umber as he prepared to be thrown back into the real world. "I'll be back, I promise!" he said, clutching his eyes shut as he desperately clung onto Umber.

Then, everything went black. For the few seconds he went from unconscious to conscious, he swore he could still smell Umber's faint scent roaming through the air as it tried to find its way back to him.

He jolted his eyes awake, dropping the dreamvisitor on the hospital floor and looked at Umber's bandaged body.

"No! What the fuck happened?!" Flame yelled as he looked back at them all, clutching Umber's talons in his. "Who pulled me out?!

Everyone looked at each other in confusion, and it was obvious they hadn't done anything.

He looked back at Umber's face, and could see a shy tear running down his scales, officially marking the end of their meet.

Author's note: So this chapter *was* going to get released yesterday, and it was perfectly on track to, except some personal stuff came up Friday and I think I'll be taking a week off to deal with that (this isn't absolute though, so it's possible Healed will be updated next Saturday). Sorry about this!

Chapter 21

Flame's POV

Flame groggily opened his eyes as his head rested on Umber — as usual. Immediately though, he was blinded by the bright summer light shining through the window and lighting the room up like a candle — no, brighter than *a* candle, it was more like a million.

He rarely ever slept in the other bed. Sometimes he would sleep in the chair that the RainWing left in the room — which he did *not* think was intentional — or fall asleep at the side or end of Umber's bed.

Only when his neck and back especially hurt from the hunched over position did he ever sleep in his, and even then he'd look over at Umber and stay up imagining that he would just wake up and his burns would he fine, and there would be no scar — actually, fuck the scar, as long as he was alive.

Sometimes, he was too exhausted (mentally *and* physically) at the end of the day to even get in bed in the first place, even though he sat around all day and did nothing. Recently, it was even difficult for him to get up in the morning, and Umber's scent definitely didn't help either.

One day at a time, is what he told himself.

He raised his talons up in front of his face, exhausted, especially after yesterday. It was bright and sunny outside, which was ironic because bright and sunny was the exact *opposite* of how he was feeling right now; it was more dark and cloudy, with a bit of a thunderstorm — no — hurricane for him.

He looked around at the empty room, reminiscing about the dreamvisit he had with Umber yesterday.

After he had been thrown out of the dreamvisit, Clay used it next, then Moon, Kinkajou, Qibli, Sora, Turtle, Jet, Turvar, Zephyr, and finally, Peril, which Turtle had to enchant the dreamvisitor to *not* melt in her talons. The only reason he even allowedhim to do that in the first place was because the others forced him to let him dreamvisit, and all of the spells he would ever needto cast would've been cast right then and there.

Though, everyone did seem a little happier afterward, even Turtle.

It didn't look like an act, or a façade, and he even slightly squinted his eyes while he was smiling after he came back from the dream, which Umber taught him that meant it was genuine.

Maybe he doesn't *want to hurt us?* Flame wondered. *Regardless, he still has a plan!*

The whole thing took most of the day, Peril only getting her turn at sunset. Flame planned on asking Clay to dreamvisit again today, because talking to Umber yesterday was the only time he had truly been happy in the last week.

Especially now that I know what happened in the war, Flame thought. *If only he had told me sooner, we could've worked through it and maybe he wouldn't be trapped in nightmares about it...*

He looked up at Umber's face and wondered what he was dreaming about. Was it another nightmare? Or maybe a peaceful dream? Maybe his mind was tricking him into thinking that he was dreamvisiting him right now, and telling him horrible things that Flame had no control over.

He felt so bad for him, and just wanted to hug him until he couldn't anymore just for even a chance that his mind would realize it was him and change his dreams for the better.

The image of the pure shock on Crane's face as Icicle slid her talon across her throat still plagued his mind, and there was no cure in Pyrrhia. He could only imagine how Umber felt watching it in person.

Watching Chromis die in such a violent and cruel way would probably do something similar to him, except there would be a lot more slashing and fire than running.

And Umber thinks he should've been the one to die, Flame thought

"*We think that his chances to live are slim,"* the healer's voice whispered in his head, sending a shiver trickling its way down his spine. All of the thoughts about Chromis immediately vanished.

No, that won't happen, Flame tried, though somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew what was going to probably happen.

"You won't die on me, right Umber?" Flame whispered, half expecting for him to open his eyes and say something. "You won't. You wouldn't!" He turned away, a tear sliding down his face. "You'll wake up, and we can both go home, I just know it!"

But with or without his consent, his mind started wandering through the endless passages and twists and turns that were the two possibilities: Umber lives, or he dies and Flame's left to rot with nobody to hold their talons in his.

No...don't you dare leave here alone! he thought with a stab of fear.

But he's going to, the back of his mind whispered, a voice that he's been hearing constantly ever since Umber went under. He couldn't stop it no matter how hard he tried, and it always said something that made his gut wrench.

He looked down at Umber, his burnt scales slightly showing along the edges of the white bandage. The blackness looked horrible, enough to make him want to gag.

But he couldn't stop looking, and as the seconds went on, a revelation stabbed him in the heart, hard enough to shatter his soul.

He's going to die... Flame realized with a stab of panic. *He's going to die in this shitty hospital room, reliving some of the worst moments of his life without me by his side.*

This thought changed everything, and it felt like his world had been

shattered even more than before; it was like someone picked up the pieces of glass and chipped away at them with their talons, until they were nothing but dust, then blew them in the wind.

As he looked at the walls, he didn't even feel like he was in the same room anymore, or even the same world. *Umber* was his world, and the little bit of hope he had been desperately clinging onto, no matter what happened, was just ripped away.

He was lost, shattered, and hopeless.

He liked to imagine that he and Umber would live a long, happy life together, and whoever was lost first would die squeezing the other's talons as tight as they possibly could, in hopes to remember them in the afterlife, and the other would live on until they died and then they would lay together in the mountain past the clouds forever.

He rested his head on Umber's chest, trying to calm himself down with reassurance that he was still alive, but it didn't have nearly the same effect as before and he just ended up soaking the bandage in tears.

For the next few minutes, he sobbed loudly into Umber's chest, reminiscing about the fun times they had together. Like the one time they went to the beach and Umber challenged him to a breath holding competition, which he obviously destroyed Flame in

Or the other time when Umber tried to cook one of Flame's recipe's and just ended up lighting the pan on fire, and ruined the pan *and* the dish.

Each tiny little memory was a bittersweet reminder of what he was about to lose — what he didn't know he could live without until now. But now he *did* know, and the feeling was almost excruciating. To look at Umber on his deathbed made him want to stay by his side for the rest of eternity.

"I-I'm going to miss you s-so much, Umber," Flame sobbed quietly, breaths of air being scarce as his chest uncontrollably contracted.

His head began pounding, the pain becoming nearly excruciating, but that didn't stop him from crying — in fact, it made him cry even harder because a lousy headache was all he got, while Umber is currently dying in a shitty hospital bed, in a shitty room, surrounded by shitty dragons.

"Flame?" a voice behind him called, followed by the sounds of the door closing behind them. Their voice was filled with concern, and by the way their voice shook a bit, he could tell that they were slightly scared. "Are you okay?" They rushed over to him and placed their talon on his arm.

Their scales were red, and their voice was high pitched. He looked back to see Zephyr staring back at him, her expression full of worry.

He tried to open his mouth, but all that came out was another loud sob. After a minute of trying to gather himself, he gained the strength to speak. "Um-Umber's g-going to d-die!" Flame cried, his voice's shakiness constantly interrupting him. "I-I can't l-lose h-him!"

He felt Zephyr's talons rub against his back comfortingly. "...Hey, I know we haven't had a chance to talk yet, and it seems like you're struggling a lot with this, so how about we talk now?" she said in a soothing, calm voice, one similar to Umber's in a way.

The first thing he wanted to tell her was "Fuck off", but he caught his breath, remembering everything Umber told him, and Starf taught him about talking.

Even though he didn't know Zephyr like Sora or Jet did, he already found himself nodding his head in agreement. The added shaking made even more tears fall down his cheeks like a waterfall, some even making their way onto the blanket.

She sat down beside Flame, their scales making contact, creating a tender warmth between them. And because she was much bigger than he was (being an older dragon and all), she towered over him and could probably lean all the way across Umber without ever trying.

"Tell me about Umber," Zephyr suggested softly. "Tell me about a

few things you've done together. Like something fun, or maybe some happy moments you've had with him." Though, he thought that this was stupid, because what would telling her about Umber do anyways?

Regardless, he assumed she knew how to do her job, and do it well seeing how she was the one in charge of the whole Healing Center.

So, he thought back to another happy memory, something he's been doing ever since he first got here: reminiscing... Constantly reminiscing.

"T-There was th-this one t-tme w-when me a-and Um-Umber went to t-this is-island," Flame explained.

He could still remember the way Umber laid down next to him in the grass as they stared at the sunset, their talons and tails intertwined all the while. All from the way he cuddled his head on his chest, to the way he smiled all reminded him of how happy they used to be.

"What island was it?" Zephyr asked. "What did you two do there?"

"I-It was...uh...P-Prince Egret Is-Island," Flame sniffled. "W-We spent th-the night t-there."

He couldn't help but delve deeper into that memory. He closed his eyes, imagining the buzzing of the insects, the cold night air against his scales, and of course, Umber's warmth as he rested his head on his chest. Flame had his wings wrapped around them both, acting as a nice blanket to keep them both warm.

"*The sky is so pretty tonight," Umber said lightly, pointing to the stars in the sky. It looked like a million different colored fireflies were buzzing around them, showing off their pretty bright light. "No wonder you like this place so much."*

"*Well, it's where I hatched, after all," Flame responded, resting his head beside Umber's.*

"Oh, I've heard of that place, I've been told it's beautiful," Zephyr explained. "Is that why you like it so much? Or is it because of

another reason?"

"N-No, I hatched t-there," Flame informed. "B-Before my m-mom took me b-back to t-the Talons O-Of Peace."

"*You're so lucky to have been hatched in such a nice place like this," Umber said. "I was hatched in a mud puddle." Though, he was saying it like not every MudWing enjoyed a nice mud bath.*

"*Hey, it's not my fault I wasn't immediately born into filth," Flame said playfully. "How do MudWings enjoy mud by the way? Whenever I even get a drop of it on me, I feel so dirty."*

"*Flame, we both know the only reason you're half clean right now is because you accidentally fell in the river," Umber said jokingly, "I wouldn't be surprised if I caught* you *taking a mud bath while we're here."*

"*Blah, blah, blah, MudWing," Flame booed. "I always take baths!"*

"*Sureeee you do." Umber snuggled closer, a bigger smile forming on his face as he closed his eyes. Flame pulled his wing in tighter, as if he was tucking him in goodnight.*

"I see," Zephyr said. "So, how long ago did you two do this? Was it back at the Healing Center, or when you moved away?"

"I-It was, uhm..."

"*Hey, Flame," Umber whispered, perking his head up to look at him.*

"Uh..."

"*Yeah, MudWing?" Flame whispered back.*

"It was..."

"*I love you, you know that, right?" Umber asked reassuringly.*

"Something wrong?" Zephyr asked.

"*Of course I do!" Flame said, almost as if he had taken offense to such a*

statement. "And I love you, too."

"N-No- it's j-just..."

"*Well, how about you prove it to me then?" Umber looked up at him with a smile, his face almost too hard to resist.*

Looking down at him, he felt the same fire spark and light up, the same one that began smoldering ever since the day they met, and he shot the same smile back.

"I-I..."

Graciously, they both leaned in, before the short distance between their snouts closed, and their lips met. The stars shone brightly and the crickets chirped beautifully in the background, making for the perfect background noise as they kissed under the stars.

And the familiar shock he felt whenever he and Umber kissed zipped through him in that moment, immediately bringing him back to the reality of the situation instead of dwelling on the past.

He looked back down at Umber, the sight instantly sending another wave of shock through him. It was as if he half expected Umber to be staring back up at him, ready to repeat that memory in his head.

And it hurt — it hurt that he knew that he would probably never make another memory like that with him again.

Everytime he looked down at Umber, all he felt was pain. He had gotten so used to it over the last week that he could hardly even tell that it was there anymore. Bringing himself back to the past made him forget what it was like to be in this hospital room, so now that he had a taste of what it was like before, it became unbearable.

I can't stay here... Flame realized.

I can't stay here, I can't stay here, I can't stay here, I can't stay here, echoed a million times in his head.

"I have to go!" Flame exclaimed, jolting up and knocking Zephyr's talons away. He could feel his talons already shaking, and his heart

beginning to pound as adrenaline pumped throughout his entire body.

He immediately began heading for the door, when he heard Zephyr yell back. "Hey, wait! What happened? What's wrong?" she tried, though it was no use as her voice was already muffled by the door as he slammed it behind him.

As he entered the hall, he could see Turtle and Kinkajou were sitting next to each other in a couple of chairs in the hall. They looked like they were both talking about something; something that obviously made them both smile before being interrupted by a slamming door.

He turned the other way and sprinted down the hall, the only thing on his mind being what he's going to do without Umber, followed by the panic of his newfound realization. He heard the door creak open behind him.

"Flame!" Zephyr yelled from down the hall, but he just kept running, knowing that he couldn't stand another second in that room.

The shakiness of his legs made him feel like he was going to fall over any second now, but the adrenaline pumping through him was enough to keep him going. He could hear Zephyr's talons clacking against the floor behind him as he ran.

Finally, after running down many flights of stairs, he slammed into the door that led to the lobby and nearly broke them off of the hinges. There, he saw the rest of everyone, though Clay was missing but he assumed that he was probably in the snack bar or something.

Turvar definitely caught his eye too, as the white bandages around his wings were completely gone now, and he had a few noticeable scars like polka dots scattered around each of his wings.

There were a few other dragons in the waiting room: a few NightWings, SeaWings, and a SkyWing — who was working the front desk.

He looked behind him to see Turtle, Kinkajou, and Zephyr all chasing close behind him, before looking back to see the other's eyes already on him as well.

"Flame?" Qibli asked confusedly. "Hey, hey, what happened? Why are you running?" he tried, though it was no use because he had already made his way fully through the lobby and over to the door.

He put his talons on the handle and began pushing it, freedom mere inches away. He was sure he would be able to outfly them all. Besides, what were they going to do? Tackle him out of the sky? Break into his house? They wouldn't do that!

But something stopped him as he was seconds away from running through the door. He felt a talon grip his free arm tightly, as if whoever was doing it was trying to keep him still. "Flame! What happened?"

As he turned his head back to see who it was, his eyes landed on something that sent even more panic than before running through him. Turtle had made talon-to-scale contact with him, and he swore he could feel a tingle on his scales right where Turtle's talons made contact.

Almost like a reflex, he whipped his whole body around and clawed Turtle right across his face as hard as he possibly could, ensuring that whatever spell he was about to cast on him didn't go through — the claw was more of a punch or slap though, but his claws definitely scratched him.

"DON'T FUCKING TOUCH ME!" Flame yelled mid claw.

Turtle stumbled to the side, struggling to keep his balance. He looked around one last time to see everyone's eyes in the lobby staring at him in shock. A few of them gasped, but all of their jaws were dropped in disbelief.

But he didn't stay to see the result of what he had just done, and instead bolted out through the door and shot himself into the air.

The feeling of sunlight against his scales was something he hadn't

felt in a while, as he was either in Umber's room, or downstairs getting something to eat every couple days — and even those trips scared him, as he was worried something might happen while he was gone.

The wind against his wings felt good; too good for what he was feeling like right now. Flying would always help him calm down, but not now, and maybe not again for a long time.

He looked back at the hospital one last time, heartaches sending tiny shockwaves of pain across his chest and arms, as if Turvar was blasting him in the heart a thousand times a second.

Goodbye, Umber, Flame thought, a lowly tear dripping down his face. *I promise that I'll never, ever forget you.*

Turtle's POV

Turtle stumbled as he resisted the urge to black out, constantly tripping over his talons and begging them to stay glued to the floor. His other talons habitually gripped the part on his face where Flame had tried to claw him, even though he very well knew there was nothing there.

Flame had hit him hard, and even though his scales couldn't be penetrated by anything, a hard smack across the face could still give him a massive headache, or even knock him out.

He thought that maybe Flame had changed ever since Umber came into his life, who wouldn't? Umber was one of the most pure, kind dragons he had ever met. A dragon who was even able to change Flame: a dragon the exact *opposite* of Umber.

He's just going through a lot... Turtle told himself time and time again. Everytime Flame yelled and screamed and said the meanest things a dragon could say to another, he would always round it up to him hurting. Though, he never thought he'd gotten to the point where he'd strike someone else like this.

And right as he felt himself begin to trip and fall, Kinkajou quickly ran over and grabbed his arm, stabilizing him before he hit the

ground.

And as his senses came back to him, he started feeling each throb of his inevitable headache.

"Turtle, are you okay?!" Kinkajou asked frantically, her scales mostly white with tiny splotches of black scattered around at seemingly random.

Other dragons including Zephyr, Moon, Qibli, a NightWing, and SeaWing all surrounded him. Jet, Sora, and Turvar all stayed in their seats in shock.

Clay was outside with Peril, sleeping up on the hill as they hadn't had much time to spend together ever since they arrived at the hospital. He wished that he could enchant Peril's scales to *not* set the place on fire, but the others would definitely know something was up.

"I'll go get an ice pack!" The SkyWing at the front desk said as she hurried through a door he assumed led to a room in the back.

"Move your talons," Kinkajou asked, trying to bump his talons out of the way gently.

Even though they both knew that there wouldn't be anything there, he obliged as his head was already hurting enough — though, it was bearable, he just had to sit down for a few minutes and wait for it to go away.

After a few seconds of her inspecting his scales, she came to the conclusion that he was fine.

"I swear to the moons the next time I see him, I'm going to get the biggest papaya I can find and shove it up his nose!" Kinkajou exclaimed. The black spots on her scales began overtaking the white.

"H-Hey, Kinkajou, calm down," Turtle groaned as he gripped his head. "He's just going through a lot." They both began walking over to one of the seats in the bottom right corner of the room, next to the glass door.

"That doesn't excuse that though!" Kinkajou argued. "Just because you're *hurting* doesn't give you the right to try and slash your friend across the face!"

Every yell that came from her only made his head hurt worse. "Shhhh," Turtle shushed as another wave of pain went through his head, and Kinkajou obviously got the message by the way she lowered her voice.

Turtle sat down at the seat furthest from the door, and Kinkajou sat next to him. The others all sat down near him, shooting him concerned looks as if he was seconds away from passing out. Though, he definitely was a few minutes ago.

Then, the SkyWing behind the desk came out from the back room, holding a makeshift ice pack in her talons.

She walked over to Turtle and handed him a plastic bag full of some crushed ice. "Here, this should help," she said.

The bag was cold, and even colder as he pressed it against his head. It took him a couple seconds to adjust to it, but once he was, his head began feeling a lot better.

"Thank you," he thanked. She nodded and sat back down at her desk.

And for the next few minutes, they sat there in silence as he waited for his headache to go away. The SkyWing at the front desk looked at him every few seconds, just to make sure he was okay.

The silence was definitely awkward, as nobody wanted to talk about what just happened. They just stared at either the floor, Turtle, or the wall.

He assumed it was because everyone was just trying to process it all, but he suspected that they were just in shock, not knowing that Flame was capable of that anymore.

Umber really took a toll on him, Turtle thought. *He's not going to die though, not on my talons he won't!*

He had been constantly thinking about a new spell ever since the last one didn't work, and he would brainstorm it with Qibli for hours.

And *this* spell *was* going to work, no matter how many hours it takes for him to get it just right. *Just a little longer, Umber. Just hold on a little longer.*

And as he began thinking more and more about his spell, his headache noticeably began going away, and he took the ice pack away from his head and set it down on the floor. Strangely, a weird excitement filled him as he began untangling the complicated knot that this spell was, thinking of solutions to most of the questions. All except one: will it work?

"Turtle, are you okay?" Kinkajou asked as she was obviously concerned, breaking his train of thought almost instantly. "Any dizziness or anything like that?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine," Turtle confirmed. "Just thinking of the spell," he whispered, looking around to check if any other dragons heard him. Nobody was paying much mind to him anymore, and the dragons from before moved back to their seats on the opposite side of the room.

There was a pause of silence. "...You know, you don't have to always be thinking about it," Kinkajou said. "You just got hit, diamond scales or not, that's going to hurt. Maybe you should take a break."

He knew that Kinkajou would say something like that, but he also knew that Umber didn't have forever; and neither did Flame, as feared he might hurt himself someway if Umber *did* die, let alone how much happier he would be if – once Umber wakes up.

"Kinkajou, Umber doesn't have much time left," Turtle said painfully, even the mention of it sending another jolt of fear through him. "Let alone Flame, I hate seeing him like this. Ever since he met Umber, he's been so happy, and I don't want to see him go back to how he used to be."

She sighed. "Relationships do that I guess, but I think you're right. Just don't be too hard on yourself over this, alright?"

Relationships... Turtle thought as he looked down at the floor, a heartache blindsiding him. *If only Anemone didn't put that love spell on her, then maybe-...maybe things would be different...* Though, he didn't blame her, as he knew she was only trying to help him the only way she knew how.

Obviously, Kinkajou recognized the look on his face, as relationships were a tough subject between the two of them. "Hey, Turtle," she said comfortingly, putting her talons on his back, even her touch being a nice distraction. "I *do* like you, It's just I think we should take things slow for now; see where things go, you know?"

"Yeah, Yeah, I know," Turtle agreed, his voice low. Even her saying she liked him back meant little to him anymore.

Every time he got like this, she would always say something similar to that, usually along the lines of "Turtle, I really like you, but it's just difficult right now," or "I like you a lot Turtle, but I'm still just a bit confused after that love spell. Maybe one day you'll find another great dragon if things don't work out between us."

But he didn't want "another dragon", he wanted her, and she wanted him, but she also didn't at the same time, which complicated things a hundred times over.

"...Maybe I wouldn't mind a date though, you know, once this whole mess is over," were the words that immediately sent a shockwave of happiness through him, his mood lifted in the snap of his talons.

He jolted his head up and turned toward her. Though he tried to hide his joy, he could tell that it was obviously slipping through by the way Kinkajou grinned at him. "Really? Are you sure?" he asked, really hoping she would stick to it.

"Well, I mean, yeah," Kinkajou said hesitantly. "Maybe the reason I'm still crushing on you, even after two years of being spell free, means they might be real and not the work of magic." Her scales turned a bright pink as her grin turned into a smile.

"When are we- uh, oh right, once Umber I heal Umber. What should we do though? I-I mean, should we go out to eat or something? Or go to the rainforest? Or..." Turtle trailed off. "Erm, we should probably save the planning for later."

He felt his face get a little hot in embarrassment, and he could already tell he was blushing just by the helpless smile that formed on his face.

Kinkajou laughed. "Yeah, that'll probably come after."

He looked into her eyes as they sparkled a hot pink, and glimmered relentlessly by the few candles that shone in the room. He felt an even bigger smile form across his face, and no matter how hard he tried to hide it, he couldn't; he was just too filled with joy of the proposal she had given him.

After a few seconds of this, he leaned back in his chair, his mind already wandering on what they would do for their date. Because after all, he wanted to make it as best he could for her so that he'd have the best shot of them being together.

It's what he's wanted for years, and now that he finally had the opportunity, he wasn't going to let it slip from under his talons.

But first, I have to heal Umber.

Author's note: Another 2 week upload, sorry! Though, I think that's probably better than the bad news I'll be giving.

I'll be taking a break for a little while, as there are things currently going on in my personal life right now. I don't know when exactly I'll be back, and I've been trying to consistently upload ever since they started on the 24th, but it's been hard. Also, my laptop broke a couple days ago which also contributes to the reason.

What does this mean? This just means I'll be taking a break for now, but do expect Healed to start again within at least 2 months (this is worst case scenario though, I might start working on Healed again by the end of the month, if not

sooner. Don't expect anything though, as it's not 100%).

But yeah, Healed will 100% be coming back, so don't worry about that haha! I'm just taking a mental health break for now.

PS: I love Turtlejou

Chapter 21

Flame's POV

He twisted the handle, before slamming the door behind him as hard as he could. A loud *bang* shot through the air, rattling the entire house around him.

His heart was racing, not after what he did, but because of the condition he finally realized Umber was in. That realization shook him to the core, panic slowly making its way into his head every time he thought about him.

As much as he wanted to go back to that hospital and kiss Umber on the forehead and tell him that everything would be okay, he couldn't bring himself to even think about going back there, especially after what he had done to Turtle.

He was surprised Turtle hadn't done anything in retaliation, like claw him back, or cast some sort of spell on him. Maybe he didn't want his cover blown in front of an entire hospital room? The others being mad at him wasn't going to stop him from seeing Umber though, so why didn't he want to? Did he somehow feel bad about it in some way?

No, he's a lying animus! he retorted in denial that deep down, he maybe believed that Turtle might not be all bad.

If Umber wasn't in the hospital, we would've gotten as far away from him as I could! ...Right? Gah! Who cares?! He deserved it and I know it!

He hadn't been home so long that it almost felt weird; he had been so used to moping around in the hospital room as he sat next to Umber, that moping around at their house felt foreign as if the hospital was his home instead of his actual home.

As he looked around, he saw that the table had a thin layer of dust at the top, as with their box of graphicolls under the table.

Home didn't feel like home anymore, not without Umber. Home would never feel like home, ever again.

*Umber*was his home. But he couldn't stand seeing him anymore, not after finally realizing what he knew would be the outcome of this whole ordeal.

The shock of the situation was still setting in, and the world he was living in hardly felt real; like a dream — he wished it was a dream anyways, and he would wake up any second to Umber shoving his wing off of himself.

We'll see each other again eventually, Umber. That I can promise.

He walked over to their couch and sat down, his talons resting on the brown oak table. He was looking down at the box of graphicolls, scenes of the past replaying in his head over and over.

If only I was just a minute faster... he thought to himself once again. He couldn't stop thinking about what could've been, knowing the inevitable fate he knew Umber would come to.

Then, he remembered something: a promise he had made to Umber right before he was forcefully pulled out of the dreamvisit, and it was a promise he intended to fulfill until only a little while ago.

I'll be back, I promise! his head raged.

But now, his heart began racing every time he thought about seeing Umber again. He guessed he would go somewhere between full panic, and sobbing uncontrollably if he was in the same room with him for even a second longer.

And the realization was just setting in that Umber would be alone with his nightmares of Crane, instead of cuddling with him in whatever world they chose.

But the thought of the feeling of Umber's scales rubbing against his woke up fear deep inside of him, where it would normally make him want to fantasize about it forever.

"FUCK!" he yelled as he slammed his talons into the table a few

times. The slam shook the whole living room floor, and it made a loud shaky sound as there was some space between the table and legs. This didn't make him feel any better though, and only made him feel angrier.

He took his talons and gripped the underside of the table, before flipping it with all of his strength, unable to stop himself even if he wanted to.

The table spun in the air, before landing near the middle of the room, making a loud *pound* that he was sure the neighbors could all hear clear as day.

Which he was right about because the laughs and screams of the dragonets playing outside immediately fell silent for a few moments before starting back up again as if nothing had happened. Dust scattered through the air in a cloud.

His eye caught the box of graphicolls sitting on the floor as it was uncovered by the table. Memories of him and Umber were already playing in his head, like anything even mildly related to Umber set off alarm bells.

"*E-Expon... Exponentially?"* Umber tried, a bittersweet memory from the past. Or in this case, just a bitter memory that made him want to curl up and cry on the floor.

"No! Go the fuck away!" *I don't want to think about him!* He kicked the box across the room, sending hundreds of ***his*** graphicolls flying all across the rotted wooden planks, reaching each corner of the room and a few even going into the kitchen.

He could feel his heart start to pick up in speed, obviously triggered by Umber appearing in nearly everything.

I need to distract myself with something! Flame thought desperately. *Maybe I can cook? Something I've never cooked Umber before!*

For a minute, he thought through all of his recipes. And though he's made Umber just about everything, there had to be *something* that didn't remind him of Umber.

As he thought, he was constantly pushing distractions of Umber out of his mind. Until he finally landed on a recipe seemingly out of nowhere.

That garlic bread steak recipe!

It wasn't a complicated recipe by any means, anyone could make it — even Umber... *No, even Chromis! Not Umber! Stop thinking about him you fucking idiot!*

He jumped up to his feet and began tiptoeing to the kitchen, making sure not to step on any graphicolls. Excitement was already flooding his body because he was about to make some more food for Umber, especially since it's been so long.

He's going to love this! he thought. *It's been so long since I've made him food!*

"Umber! I'm-" he cut himself off.

He looked around, realizing that there was no Umber in sight and that he had somehow just tricked himself into thinking he was making food for him, even after everything that's happened today.

A frown formed on his face after being forcibly pulled away from his delusion that he was still alive — that's what Flame considered him to be already. Dead.

He thought it'd hurt less if he considered him dead before he actually died, so when he *actually* died, it'd hurt much less than if he didn't.

"Umber..." his voice faltered, tears beginning to make their way down his face. His legs felt like they were going to give out any second now, and that they did.

He fell to the floor and curled up in a ball, just like he wanted to earlier. His light sobs could be heard throughout the whole house — though that wasn't surprising, as it was only three rooms.

I can't do this without you! Flame thought as he cried, a migraine already creeping its way up on him. *I'm such a mess! Why am I*

thinking you're here when you're not?!

In an attempt to make himself feel better, he slammed his talons against the floor a few times as hard as he could. And for a gracious few seconds, it did make him feel a tiny bit better, but that was short-lived as he couldn't try and *not* think about him anymore.

Right now, he was lost, unable to grasp a future without Umber by his side anymore. He didn't know what he'd do without him.

Maybe he'd just lock himself in this house forever and never leave again, not even when he...passed — even thinking about those two words made him sob even harder now that he was finally allowing himself to realize what those words really meant.

He covered nearly his whole body with his wings and whether we liked it or not, the warmth made him feel better, as if Umber was hugging him from the dream world.

He assumed the others would set up a funeral for him, one that he would definitely *not* be attending, and he'd instead be inside doing anything that would keep his mind off of him. Something like trying something like origami for the first time, or spending time trying to solve that cube he bought for Starf a while ago.

Though, he knew there still was one thing that could save Umber — or one dragon at least. And that dragon was someone who he never wanted to see again, and certainly didn't want anywhere near Umber, and that dragon was Turtle.

He'd never save Umber! If he really wanted to, he would've done it the first time! How hard can it be to make up a fucking healing spell?!

But he forcibly pushed that thought aside, not wanting to give himself any false hope. And instead continued sobbing, starting to daydream that he and Umber were cuddling in their bed right now, tails intertwined and arms wrapped tightly around each other under the covers.

Hours later...

He didn't know how long had passed, all he knew was that he had

been laying on the couch long enough that the sun was beginning to go down. He had been staring at the ceiling and reliving memories with Umber all day.

After a little while of sobbing, his tears finally ran dry and he propped himself up on the couch, grabbed one of the blankets they had hanging on the back of it, and covered himself, using one of the throw pillows to lay his head on.

The table was still laying upside down in the middle of the floor, as with the graphicolls scattered all along the floor.

What am I going to do without you? he thought with the same stabbing pain in his chest that he had been experiencing for the last afternoon. *I can't even make fucking garlic bread right now!*

He continued delving into that thought, covering himself fully with the blanket, his tail hanging off of the couch.

I can leave the Sky Kingdom, right? I can go somewhere else! I can move back to Possibility, back with my mother and Chromis! There's nothing there that would ever remind me of Umber! Or I could live outside of town, hunt my own food, build my own house! No, that'd just make me think about him- his thoughts were cut off by an unexpected knock at the door.

Gah! Will they ever leave me the fuck alone?! He assumed it had to be someone from the hospital, most likely Zephyr or Qibli since they probably had the best chance at getting him to do whatever they came here to do.

"If you're here to yell at me about Turtle, then you can go fuck yourself!" Flame yelled, his face already beginning to turn red in anger.

"Flame, it's me, Zephyr!" she said. The concern in her voice ricocheted off of the walls, each word making him want to scream at her even louder. "We want to know if you're okay!"

"Fuck off, I'm fine!" he retorted. "Leave me the fuck alone already!"

"We're worried about you!" a new voice said, one he's been hearing

extremely often ever since they all came to the hospital.

Moon's here too?! Are all of them out there?! he thought angrily, already feeling like going out there and *forcing* them to leave.

"We know you're angry, but we just want to make sure you're okay," Moon explained. "...We're the only two here if that's what you're worried about, the others are still at the hospital. So can you please just open the door and talk to us for a minute?"

Talking to them face to face was probably the last thing he wanted to do right now, as he had already made a comfortable spot on the couch where he had been lying since this morning. But he knew that they probably weren't going to give up any time soon.

"Will you go away if I do?" Flame asked hesitantly.

They better!

"Right after we make sure you're okay, we promise," Zephyr said. "We're just worried about you after earlier is all."

"Fine!"

He reluctantly lifted himself off of the couch, pushing the blanket on the floor. Normally he'd throw it back on the couch to avoid the mess, but he was probably going to be going back there in a couple of minutes, and avoiding a mess was already off the table.

He stepped around the graphicolls scattered everywhere and made his way over to the door. The air felt much colder against his scales, but it was probably because he had been under the blankets for so long.

He reached his talons and twisted the door handle, before opening it to the sight of Zephyr and Moon standing at his front doorstep. He noticed that Moon didn't have Qibli's pouch around her neck anymore, but didn't really think too much of it because it was probably some love ritual bullshit.

"Make this quick, I don't want to talk to you two fuckers any more than I have to."

Moon looked past him, to what he assumed was the mess inside the house. "Is everything okay in there?" she asked in concern.

"Yea, everything's fine! Now ask me whatever stupid questions you came here for and fuck off!" He could feel even more anger brewing inside of him, already tempted to slam the door in their face and ignore any attempts they make at trying to talk to him.

"We're just worried, we know you aren't okay, especially after what happened earlier," Zephyr said. "Turtle doesn't hate you for what you did either. You made a mistake, and that's okay-"

"What I did wasn't a fucking mistake!" Flame interrupted. "I don't give a shit if he hates me or not, he deserves everything that I've done to him and more!"

The look of surprise on Zephyr's face was well worth the outburst, as it probably woke up a few of his neighbors and maybe their dragonets.

"What happened between you and Turtle?" Zephyr asked. "You two seemed fine when you first got to the hospital, so what happened?"

He shot a glare over at Moon, whose face was already starting to go into a panic. *Let's see how you wiggle your way out of this now,* he thought.

"Uh-" Moon blurted. "I-It's just a personal grudge from a long time ago is all!" He could sense the panic in her voice as she spoke.

Ohhh, so they really do care about keeping his secret. He probably cast a spell on them just to make sure.

"Alright, well I didn't come out here so you can talk about me and Turtle, so I'll be going back inside now!" Flame said angrily.

He turned around and began walking back inside when he heard Zephyr call him back. "Flame, wait!" she said eagerly, stopping him in his tracks. "We can't force you to come back to the hospital, but Umber wants for you to dreamvisit him again."

Did they dreamvisit him again? he wondered.

This set him off. He didn't know why, but something about them telling *him* what Umber wanted made him angrier than before. *As if they fucking know what Umber wants!*

He whipped around. "And how the fuck do you know what Umber wants?!" he yelled. "How the fuck do you know that he wants me to dreamvisit him?!"

There was a moment of silence.

"No, I'm not dreamvisiting him," he said calmly. Though he was just putting up a façade in hopes that they would just leave already, and he really wanted to set them on fire right then. But somehow, he was able to contain his anger.

"But Flame, Umber-" Moon tried.

"I SAID NO!" he screamed in a burst of anger. Hearing Umber's name tipped his anger over the edge.

"Can we please just talk ab-"

"WHY THE FUCK DO YOU THINK I LEFT?! TO THINK ABOUT HIM MORE?" He shot a glare at Moon, who put her talons up to her head as if she was in pain and took a step back.

"NO! I LEFT SO I CAN NEVER THINK ABOUT HIM AGAIN! I LEFT BECAUSE I CAN'T FUCKING STAND LOOKING AT HIM ANYMORE! HE'S DEAD, AND THERE'S NOT A THING ANY OF US CAN DO ABOUT IT!"

He thought he heard one of them try and speak up, but he had already whipped around and slammed the door behind him as hard as he could.

He was boiling over with anger — so angry that it was as if his body moved for him when he began punching their hard wooden walls as hard as he could. *YOU MOHTERFUCKERS! WHY CAN'T YOU EVER JUST LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE?!* he thought in between punches and smashes.

"Flame, stop!" Zephyr begged from the other side of the door.

"GO THE FUCK AWAY! LEAVE ME ALONE!" he screamed in retaliation.

He got so lost in anger that he stopped paying attention to how much he was punching the wall, and completely ignored the pain of his bleeding knuckles.

It was only when he began splintering the wall did he realize that he was still going, and stopped. The pain began setting in, and he fell to the floor and cried and rested his head against the wood as tears stained his scales — not because of the pain, but more because of the loneliness he was feeling right then without Umber.

I can't do this anymore without you! he sobbed. *I can't live without you anymore!*

He sobbed there for the next hour until the mental exhaustion from the day had finally caught up to him and he was about ready to fall asleep.

He reluctantly stood up from his spot on the floor and made his way over to ***his*** room without even realizing, before creaking open the door.

His bed was the same way it was when they had left for their anniversary; it wasn't made and the blanket drooped off of the side of the bed.

He walked over and laid his head down on his side of the bed, and covered himself with the blankets. It felt good to finally lay in a comfortable bed for the first time in over a week — not like he had much of an issue with it in the first place.

He closed his eyes and got ready to fall asleep when a familiar scent hit his nose again.

He shot his eyes awake and looked over at the vacant side of the bed where Umber used to sleep, surprised that his scent was somehow still so prominent after all this time.

He already wanted to cry again, but his tears were long dried up; he hadn't had any water today, so they were probably going to stay

like that.

Without hesitation he lunged over to Umber's side of the bed and grabbed his pillow, hugging it tight as if he was desperately gripping onto Umber himself, trying to keep him from being pulled away by death itself.

I'm going to miss you so much... Flame thought with a stab in his heart. *Once I somehow recover from this, I promise, I will* never *forget you, I swear.*

And with that, he buried his head in Umber's pillow, wishing he hadn't cried so much earlier so that he could now, his scent making him feel more relaxed than he has in weeks, but also making him hurt more than ever at the same time.

Moon's POV

It had been nearly a week since she had talked to Flame last, mainly because she thought that trying to give him some space was probably best for now. But she hoped that he was ready to talk and listen to her instead of screaming in rage.

He thinks Umber's dead, and that's why he doesn't want to think about him, Moon thought. *But Umber's alive, and I just need to convince him that everything will be okay as long as we have Turtle. But first, I'll have to convince him that Turtle* isn't *an evil animus planning on killing everyone.*

During their last visit, whenever they talked about Turtle she could feel that he was on the edge of beginning to trust Turtle, and completely hating him at the same time. All she had to do was nudge him in the right direction slightly.

She stood up from the hospital chair and sighed. Even though her and Zephyr's visit ended in disaster, she wasn't going to give up on him, no matter what she had to do.

When Flame first left the hospital, they had tried to dreamvisit Umber again to tell him about it, but every time they did, he was locked in a nightmare and nobody could pull him out. *Except*

Flame...

So the only way she could ever find out how Umber truly felt was by taking off Qibli's skyfire and digging deep into his emotions. She needed as much as she could to convince Flame that Umber wasn't going to die and that they would make sure of that.

And I'm the only dragon who can do it.

She looked over at Qibli, who was sitting in one of the chairs in the hallway outside of Umber's room beside her. "Alright, I'm going to try and talk to Flame again," she sighed. "I'll try and convince him that Turtle isn't an evil animus.

"Are you sure he won't try and hit you? I mean, look at what he did to Turtle the other day," Qibli argued in concern.

"He won't, I've seen into his mind. As much as he wants to hit us, or "set us on fire", he won't." She made quotation marks with her talons around those words.

Looking at Qibli, she could tell that he was definitely worried about what Flame might do to her, and she didn't blame him. She wasn't quite telling the truth about Flame and not hitting her, she just wanted to make him feel better — he was tempted, but he probably wasn't going to.

There was a moment of silence. "Alright, I'll get going now," she said. "Here." She took the skyfire pouch from around her neck and handed it to Qibli.

Everyones' thoughts immediately began assaulting her mind, but she had been practicing her methods of keeping them away since the other day.

She imagined the raindrops like she usually did, trapping all of the thoughts inside. Then imagined them hitting the ground and sinking into the soil where the sun would then shine brightly, clear skies.

And then everything was silent, just as if she was wearing the skyfire.

What a relief.

"I'll be back in an hour," Moon said, turning around and walking down the hall.

She was really hoping that Flame would listen to her, even when everything from their last visit said otherwise. It had been six days since they last spoke though, so maybe he's thought about it more?

"Moon, wait," Qibli said. She turned around to look at him. "One last thing before you go."

"Yeah, yeah, of course," she said sincerely. "what is it-"

She was cut off by Qibli lunging forward to meet her lips, his eyes closed making for the perfect kiss. It definitely caught her off guard, but she wasn't going to deny a nice kiss from him, so she began kissing back.

Their lips stayed mated for the next few seconds, all reminding her about why she fell in love with him in the first place; the way he was able to find the perfect time for everything. Then they both pulled away, left to stare at each other. "For good luck," he said with a smile.

She smiled back, her heart already pounding from those few seconds. "Thanks," was all she said with a smile and a blush spread firmly across her face like glue.

She finally turned around and began heading down the hall, down the stairs, through the lobby, and out through the front door and launched herself in the air in the direction of Flame's house.

She went over her plan in her head one last time before she got there. *Alright, convince him Turtle isn't going to kill us all, then convince him that Umber's going to live,* she thought. *No big deal, right?*

She sighed, knowing that whatever was about to come next probably wasn't going to be easy — not that she expected it to be, but she wasn't the most excited about it.

After a few minutes of flying, she saw Flame's house in the distance. She thought it was so strange that you could look at any house, and no matter how bad or nice it looked, the dragon living in it could be going through so much without anyone even knowing.

She landed down on the path in front of his house, her heart pounding in anticipation of facing Flame after all this time. Would he be mad? Happy? Sad even? She didn't know.

She walked up to the door and hesitated for a moment, before holding her breath and knocking three times. "Flame?" she called out.

Is it this bitch again?! Flame thought in anger. *Just fuck off already!*

It had been long enough without her mind reading that she completely forgot she could be reading Flame's mind right now and trying to help him more. In her mind, she took Flame's raindrop out from the ground and let his thoughts roam free.

Something she could instantly tell was that his thinking was all over the place; vastly different from how it was before. Something wasn't right.

"Flame, it's me, Moon," she called. "I know you're in there, can you please just open the door so we can talk?"

Gahhh! he thought in annoyance. *I'll just open the door and tell her whatever she wants to hear, then she can fuck off, just like last time.*

She heard angry talonsteps making their way to the door, the creaking floorboards being a clear indicator of it.

The doorknob jiggled a bit as he unlocked it, she could feel her heart racing a thousand times faster than before. Once he finally opened it, she saw a sight that she'd expected *last* from Flame, out of all dragons.

He was a complete mess, from the way he wobbled slightly as he stood, to the way he looked at her with his expression full of slight confusion and disorientation. His scales were disheveled as if he hadn't taken a proper bath in days, or even left his house for that

matter.

She looked past him and saw enough empty bottles to cover his entire table, which was put back in its original spot that wasn't in the middle of the floor. She wondered what was inside of them, but that was quickly answered the second Flame spoke.

"Wwhat the ffuck do you want?" Flame slurred, his breath reeking of alcohol.

"F-Flame, are you drunk?" she asked nervously. If he was tempted to do something to her sober, she could only imagine what he'd do while drunk.

"Yeah? And?" he retorted, his patience slowly wearing thin.

She could already see that the conversation was going nowhere and didn't want to get too off track like last time and make him mad. "Can we go inside and talk for a few minutes?"

Flame hesitated, thinking through all of the options. *Gah! Just fuck off already!* This went on for another few seconds where he was mixed between telling her to "fuck off and never come back" and letting her inside to get it over with.

"Fine!" Flame finally agreed. "As soon as you do whatever ssstupid welfare check you're doing, you get the fuck out and leave me alone!" He jerked his head forward during that sentence, almost causing him to lose his balance and fall over.

How drunk is he? she wondered. Sure, at least forty or fifty empty bottles were laying on the floor, but he seemed like he hadn't left his house in days, so surely they couldn't have *all* been from today. If they were, he would probably be passed out drunk on the floor, or even dead.

Flame turned around and began walking inside, walking straight past all the bottles on the floor as if he knew where they were by memory. He stumbled a few times and he stepped, displaying to her just how drunk he really was.

He walked over to the table and sat down on the couch, which was

surprisingly clean compared to the rest of the living room; there were only a few spots where he had obviously spilled some alcohol.

"Well? Are you coming?" he asked Moon, who was still cautiously standing at the doorway.

"Oh- of course," she responded hastily, forgetting that she had been standing there the whole time. She began making her way through the door, closing it behind her and stepping over many glass bottles, just so that she didn't slip or break any.

The entire house smelled more of alcohol than his breath did, an unfamiliar smell that almost made her sick. But she had a dragon to help here, and she wasn't going to leave until she was done.

She sat down next to him, an awkward string of silence strung between them. And as if he cut it with his own talons, Flame finally spoke up. "Well?" he said angrily, his tone threatening and scary.

"I just came by to tell you that Umber *will* be okay, you know that right?" Moon tried. She could already pick up a mix between anger and sadness coming from Flame. And almost as if they canceled each other out, Flame spoke up.

"He's already dead," he said, defeat rippling throughout his voice. "He's been dead ever since the day he was caught under that beam. All they're doing there is keeping him alive to suffer."

She felt a sense of remorse for him. He was obviously hurting right now more than she could ever imagine; more than her mind reading could ever pick up. Subconsciously, Flame's mind was juggling between "What will I do without him?" and "I can't stand to look at him anymore."

"I'm so sorry..." Moon said lowly. She tilted her head to look down at the table, which had many beer bottles stacked on it. "...But I can promise you that Turtle *will* heal him, the spell is nearly ready-"

"No!" Flame interrupted, a jolt of anger surging through his mind causing her to flinch. "He's not going to fucking live! If he wanted to heal him, he would've done it the first fucking time!"

"He's not trying to kill Umber! He's trying to do the opposite!" Moon argued.

"How would you know?!" Flame screamed, standing up from the couch and staring at her. "For all you know, he could've implanted that in your fucking head! Moon, do you not understand just how powerful animus magic is? For fucks sake, did you see what Darkstalker did?!"

"He wouldn't do that!" Moon retorted. "He's the entire reason Darkstalker is gone! He's the one who spied on Darkstalker for *days* using his magic!"

She sensed a pause in Flame's mind, anger emanating in pulses from him. *He's fucking brainwashed her too! He probably implanted those memories in her head!*

"...Get out."

"What?"

"I SAID GET THE FUCK OUT!"

He lunged at her, grabbing her wrists and forcibly pulling her off of the couch. He began dragging her through the house and toward the front door. "Flame stop! Let go of me!"

"No! You're fucking leaving! There's no way you could ever know Turtle was never lying to you, and you sure as fuck aren't going to put those ideas in my head!"

She had to think of something, and something quick. Something that would convince him that Turtle wasn't evil; something that would prove it beyond a shadow of a doubt; something that would make Flame stop in his tracks. But she only had a short time to think as they were nearly at the door.

Then it hit her. *He doesn't know about the skyfire, does he?*

They were stopped at the door at this point, and Flame was getting ready to twist the handle and throw her out. "Flame, wait!" she tried, but her cries went unheard as he began turning the handle.

"Get the fuck out of my house!" He continued to jiggle the door handle, struggling to open it as Moon struggled.

"Can we just talk? Please?" she tried, but the door was open now and Flame was about ready to throw her out.

It was now or never, she had no other options, as she was mere seconds away from being thrown into the gravel.

"I CAN READ MINDS!"

And just like that, Flame immediately froze there, motionless as he was about to throw her through the door. She was relieved that she didn't have to try and hide it from him anymore, but also worried at the same time; his thoughts were already racing with questions.

Questions like "Is she lying?" or "Is she reading my thoughts right now?" and "Darkstalker was the only dragon with mind reading!" But there was one question that kept crossing his subconscious over and over, and that question was "Does Umber know?"

"What?" he asked sternly in the same threatening voice as before.

"I can read minds! I can read yours, Qibli's, Clay's, Peril's, and even Turtle's!" Flame let go of her wrists and took a few steps away from her, leaving her to stand at the opened door alone.

She took a peek out to see if any dragons had heard her, as she did say those things quite loudly, but there were no other dragons outside except a few dragonets down the street. They were far enough away that she was sure they couldn't have heard her.

What the fuck? Why do all of them have some sort of crazy secret?! Flame thought. *Did Turtle give her mind reading? Can she hear my thoughts right now?*

"No Turtle didn't give me mind reading, I've had it since I was hatched." Moon corrected. Her talons were shaking at this point, anxiety flooding her veins as her heart pounded loud enough that she swore Flame could hear it.

"...So you've been listening to my thoughts this whole time?" She

could feel anger rushing through him at this point, and that showed in his voice.

"No no! I've been...uhm," she paused as she tried to come up with a different excuse that didn't reveal the skyfire. "...I've been suppressing them mostly, it's only when you think about me do your-"

So you can read my thoughts? Well then here's what I want you to do, Flame thought. Moon mentally prepared for what was probably about to echo through her head, as she could already sense that it wasn't going to be good.

I want you to GET THE FUCK OUT!

She felt a stab of pain shoot through her head, that being the loudest anyone has ever...well...*thought* at her. She guessed it probably had something to do with his drunken state, but also the sheer anger he was going through.

Reflexively, her talons shot up to her forehead, trying to soothe a pain that she could never.

GET THE FUCK OUT RIGHT NOW! he continued. *GET OUT AND NEVER COME BACK!*

Her head gushed with pain as she stumbled through the open door and out onto the gravel, where she tripped over her talons and fell. Little rocks embedded themselves in between her scales and she didn't even notice that Flame had slammed the door.

Though Flame had stopped screaming in his head, the pain still lasted as his mind kept echoing it over and over like a scream echoing off of cave walls and coming back to you a few times before fading. But this echo wasn't fading and was keeping the same power each time it circled back.

She got up to her feet and took a few steps, before jumping in the air and flying as fast as she could to get out of range.

Now, she could feel that all the trust she felt for Turtle from Flame before was completely gone; he was nowhere near ever trusting

Turtle anytime soon now and she was realizing she messed this up, badly.

But there was one more thought that crossed Flame's subconscious before she flew far enough away, making her heartache in sadness and immediately making her worry.

Is life really worth living without him?

Author's note: Since I took such a long break, I made sure to write a longer chapter this time to make up for it. Like I said, I would start writing again by the end of the month (I started this chapter last Saturday). I feel like my writing did improve this chapter a considerable amount in this chapter though.

Also, reviews keep me motivated and I always love reading them, regardless if they're on Reddit, FFN, Wattpad (I get like 2 views a chapter there), or AO3. So if you have anything to say, good or bad, I'd really like to hear about it. My Discord is Amisgal if you'd rather say something there.

Chapter 22

TW: Gore

Umber's POV

He looked around, the same fake sky, ground, warmth, everything. Except, something was different this time; something marginally different: he was fully aware of what was happening, right now, right here, in the same dream he's been having ever since Chromis's hatching day party.

He was holding a spear this time, no armor or anything, and was even already subconsciously flapping his wings as he hovered in the air, huddled close to Crane.

No no no no, not this dream! he thought. *I can't watch Crane die again!*

As he looked around at the surrounding IceWings, every single one of them was expressionless — emotionless. This gave him an eerie feeling, it was creepy. He felt like they'd all lunge at him at the same time and kill him right then and there.

But as he gazed around the crowd more, he noticed that there was one dragon who seemed different from the rest. Her unmistakable shiny white scales shone in the sun, and she was staring him down with a massive smile spread evenly across her face. Her gaze was unsettling, as her smile seemed wider than he could ever do.

Why is this happening to me?! he thought as the sheer amount of stress and fear made him want to break down into tears and fall into the pool of blood he knew was below him. But he knew for sure his mind would punish him for that in some way so he restrained himself.

Maybe Crane would die, regardless of what he did, and scream at him again like the last time when Flame visited.

Flame... He felt his heart ache at the thought of him. *Was he really dreamvisiting me, or was my mind just giving me a break? If he was real, then why hasn't he come back yet? Why has he been away for so long? He promised me he'd come back, so where is he? Maybe he's here right now, watching me while I battle another nightmare, waiting for the right time to pull me out.*

Though he didn't have much of a sense of time in a dream, he knew it had been well over a couple of days since he had visited last. If it really was him, and it really had been that long since the last time, he knew there had to be something wrong. Maybe he got hurt, or maybe something came up. Maybe the dreamvisitor got lost or stolen somehow.

But couldn't Turtle magic up another dreamvisitor? No, then Flame would surely figure out he's animus.

There were a million different explanations as to why he hadn't dreamvisited yet, and he knew it had to only be a matter of time.

He just needed to get through this dream though. Just this one dream, and surely things would get better from there. But watching Crane in front of his eyes again wasn't an option, and he knew he had to do something about it.

So as Icicle stared at them with her menacing eyes, and pointed spear, he fidgeted with his own spear a bit, nervous that he'd be forced to witness his own sister die again, and again, and again.

But as he was deep in fear, an idea hatched in his head; one that surely couldn't fail. *I can't be killed in my own dreams, right? I know what's going to happen, and I can stop it! I can save her!*

So over the next couple minutes, he planned out what he'd do, from start to finish. He never saw exactly what Crane did to fight Icicle, as he was never lucid for this part of it. But he did see the first parts of her lunge, and she always stuck out her right talon to grab at him and held the spear in her left talon.

I'll lunge first, and push Crane out of the way, he thought. *Then I can work on overpowering her from there, and I can move on to whatever*

dream I have next... Right? That's how he hoped it would work anyways.

So there he waited, staring at them all as they surrounded him. And even though their gazes were blank, it still felt like scalding daggers were being shot through his scales, burning them to a crisp and leaving a wound through the back.

That must be what I look like in the real world right now... Umber thought. *I can only imagine how much it hurts him to look at me the way I am.*

He was really beginning to regret his decision of staying back — of feeling that saving Flame was the only way to redeem himself of Crane. But he didn't feel redeemed right now. Instead, he was being tortured even more than before by his own mind.

He knew they would have both made it out if he had only decided to put more power into his lunge. But it felt like Crane was grabbing his back legs and pulling him, stopping him from saving them both. *I should've told him at the beach, then maybe things would be different right now.*

And though he was definitely scared of dying, that wasn't what he was most worried about — no — what he was most worried about was leaving Flame alone without him. He was scared he might go back to how he used to be if he hadn't already.

That's how he coped with his mother, so surely the way he coped with this would be much similar, if not worse.

Oh, Flame. I'm really missing you right-

His thoughts were cut off by Icicle lunging at him, catching him completely off guard. As much as he wanted to think about Flame right now, he couldn't. He had to save Crane, end of story.

If this were any normal fight, he would be on high alert. But this was far from *any* normal situation. Out of the corner of his eye, he could already see Crane beginning to lunge. Almost like a reflex, he shot himself forward, intercepting Crane and throwing her to the

side before Icicle could get to her.

And that's when he felt the iciness of Icicle's talons grip his shoulders, making him gasp from the cold

Shock. But a little chilliness wouldn't phase a soldier like him, especially not now.

The first thing he knew he had to do was get the spear away from her, and since she had it in her non-dominant talon — or at least that's what he was betting on — he would have a much easier time getting it away from her.

He grabbed at her spear with his talons, and Icicle gripped the spear with both of hers and they struggled with it for a few seconds. A few kicks and light scratches were traded, but neither could do anything more than that without giving up the weapon.

They were stuck at a stalemate; neither of them were able to take the spear from one another and Umber knew that they couldn't sit like this forever, otherwise one of the other IceWings might join in, and then things would really be bad.

As he tried to take the spear away from her, he headbutt her as hard as he could and she went staggering back, trying to regain her balance in the air.

He threw the spear away and watched as it fell through the air just to make sure none of the other IceWings magically caught it somehow.

He turned back to look at Icicle and immediately lunged at her. He gripped his talons around her shoulders, making sure to dig in his claws as much as he could in an attempt to stagger her a bit, but was met with a stinging pain in his abdomen in return, as if he had been struck by her tail, except it was laced with SandWing venom instead.

The IceWings, the sky, the sun, the grass, and even his sibs all disappeared at that moment. Everything turned black as if he was in the abyss he knew was below him, a lingering pool of blood

calling his name.

He quickly looked down to see what had stabbed him, and he caught his eye on a sight that made him panic internally a bit, but he made sure his face didn't reflect that; as if he'd ever show fear to someone like Icicle, real or not.

There was a dagger comfortably buried in his side, blood already gushing down his scales. She hadn't been holding a dagger before, and there was no way she could've been able to get one in the couple of seconds he was looking away, so that left him to wonder: where did she get it from?

"Umber!" Crane yelled frantically, reaching her talon out as if she expected him to grab it.

"N-No, stay out of this-." Icicle dug the dagger deeper into his side, causing the tip of the blade to puncture through his back.

He screamed out in pain, coughing up dark red blood all over Icicle's chest and slamming his left talon against her shoulder to try and loosen her grip a bit, but that did little to nothing.

"Shut the fuck up," Icicle demanded.

This caught him off guard a bit, as this was the first time Icicle had ever spoken in one of his dreams before, so he thought that it had to mean something. Maybe he was somehow getting closer to finally getting her out of his dreams? Or maybe he was just getting further, and her newfound aggression was a sign that it would never get better.

But that thought was cut short when Icicle ripped the dagger out from his side, and pain hit him like a shockwave throughout his entire body.

Lowly tears dripped down his face, as the pain was becoming almost too much for him to handle. *Why does it hurt so much?!* Umber thought. *I've been stabbed before, it never hurts like this!*

"Stop it! You're hurting him!" Crane screamed.

"I don't really give a shit!" Icicle retorted.

His talon immediately rushed down to cover the wound, both putting pressure and helping with the pain. The small knife was stained with red, and Icicle had that same smile on her face from when she ruthlessly murdered Crane.

He would never forget it; it was permanently burned into his memory, forever plaguing his mind like a disease.

Her ice cold grip helped with the pain, but it only served as a minor distraction from everything else — something he could try and focus on instead of the unbearable pain in his side.

Icicle raised her talons to his throat as they locked eyes, her stare cold and merciless just like her grasp. He tried to struggle, but his bones felt as if they were welded together. It was as if a million IceWings blew their frostbreath on him all at the same time, freezing him into a cube.

He was trapped; there was nothing he could do except sit there and watch as he succumbed to the same fate as Crane.

She's going to kill me... Umber thought. *But I can't let her. Real or not, I'll never let her hurt any of us again!*

"Is that so?" Icicle responded to his thoughts. Her talons rested carefully at his throat, ready to slide across any moment. "What are you gonna do about it? You're going to die here, and then I'll make you watch as I kill your beloved Crane."

No, I'll never let you lay another talon on her! he thought out in anger. He knew he may never get a chance like this ever again to save Crane, so he had to work with what he had, regardless of the circumstances.

With a renewed vigor, he tried as hard as he could to move any part of his body. He tried his talons, but only managed to get a single twitch out of them before giving up on that idea — if he couldn't even move a claw, how would he manage to fight her?

The air from his wings blew relentlessly as he flapped, blowing him

in the face and making his eyes tear up even more than before.

Wait, that's it! he realized.

He knew Icicle couldn't hold his weight, not even in a dream — not like he had any other choice though. If he closed his wings, he hoped that there was no way she would be able to keep her grip on him while also keeping herself in the air.

Here goes nothing. He prayed to the moons that this would work.

In one swift motion, he relaxed his wings and talons, leaving Icicle's grip to falter and let him go. He felt relief flood his body, desperately trying to thank whatever higher power let him escape that situation.

"NO!" Crane yelled.

As he was falling, he looked up to see not only Icicle staring at him as he fell but also Crane turning into a dive to chase after him, her right talon reaching out to try and catch him as he fell.

Her expression seemed to be pure fear, probably because she'd end up losing him. *No, she's not real.* Umber told himself. But even knowing that still hardly took away how much it hurt each time he watched her die; each time he looked at the way she stared at him as Icicle slit her throat, pleading for help.

He tried to flap his wings but only managed to slow himself down a tiny bit before going back into a freefall — he was too weak to fly right now.

He looked down at his side which was still gushing blood and had yet to clot.

I've lost too much blood, he realized. He could already feel the exhaustion and fatigue setting in. It felt weird being tired while sleeping, but that wasn't at the top of his worry list right then. Right now, he had to focus on what came next because one thing was for certain, and that was that Crane would most definitely follow him all the way down to the blood pool he knew was below them.

"Crane, leave me!" he tried with little hope that it'd actually do anything.

"No! I won't let you die!" she replied. "Take my talon!"

Completely out of options, he complied and reached his talons out. Crane was clearly getting closer, though not very fast — not fast enough.

Even though he knew that they'd land in the reeking pool flooding with blood before she was able to catch him, he still had the tiniest bit of hope still smoldering in him that maybe she could catch him in time.

He thought that maybe if Crane caught him and they never landed, this dream would end and he'd move onto another nightmare that would no doubt be better than this — anything would be better than this.

She was close, their talons just inches apart, when he looked up at her face. She looked like she was hopeful that they'd get out of this together, but also terrified at this single moment.

But almost as if he was calculating the seconds in his head, he knew they were hardly a split second from landing in the pool below.

You're too late...

And with that, they both splashed down into the pool of blood, massive waves rippling through. Iron immediately filled his nose, the stench making him sick to his stomach just from the few seconds he was close enough.

His talons instinctually gripped his side again to stop most of the pain. But that also meant he'd be alive in this dream longer, though he suspected that it probably wouldn't matter regardless and he'd just be putting himself through more pain than he had to go through. *Maybe I already did enough, and Crane is safe now.*

He's gone through this enough to know what was going to happen as soon as Crane gathered her bearings.

He popped his head up from under the pool, clutching his side with his talon as he laid on his back. "Umber?" Crane called out. "Umber, where are you?"

"I'm here," he responded. *The sooner she does whatever she needs to do, the sooner I can move on from this and not see her die.*

"Oh my gosh, Umber!" She splashed her way over, little droplets hitting him in the face the whole time. "Are you okay?! Where did she stab you?" She was frantic, almost as frantic as he was the day he watched her die to Icicle's talons.

"I'm fine," he quickly said. "just get out of here, please! I don't want to watch you die again!"

"I'm not leaving you to die here! Not like you did to me!" She began searching around the area where she saw Icicle stab him until she felt his talons gripping his side and replaced his with hers.

He felt a pain in his chest listening to her say that, even if she wasn't real it still hurt the same. He wasn't going to say anything about it though; he was scared of what she might say in return.

Would she lash out at him again like last time? Or would she say that she doesn't blame him? He didn't know, but he definitely wasn't going to take the risk and find out.

"C-Can you stand?" she asked, panicked. Through her blood-stained face, he could see tears beginning to form in her eyes.

"No, I don't think so." Though he hadn't tried yet, he knew that if he couldn't even fly, there was probably little chance he could stand. Just the thought of standing up sent a shiver of pain down his spine.

"I'll just have to drag you then. I can carry your weight, right? You don't weigh that much, right Umber? I-I could carry you perfectly fine!"

He could feel her begin to panic even more as the stress of the situation set in. *This is how I felt the first time I had this dream,* he thought. *We've switched places, all because I felt like saving her. Now I*

have to watch her suffer as she watches me die...

He clenched his fists as sadness fell over him, angry at his mind for putting him through this, except even worse this time. *I can't win. No matter what I do, I can't win. I don't save her, I watch her die. I do save her, she watches me die, and I watch her suffer still.*

"Crane, just leave me! I'll catch up with you, alright? Go find the others and get them back to the Mud Kingdom, I'll be right behind you."

"N-No you won't!" she sobbed, her voice a mixture of tears and anguish as she choked on her own words. "You can't even stand up, let alone fly! I'm not leaving you here alone while you die!"

"Crane-"

"S-SHUT THE FUCK UP!" her voice faltered. She was completely sobbing at this point and he could see tears violently pouring down her face, even through the blood. "You're going to have a p-proper funeral, and not end up as one of t-those washed up, decaying bodies like some of the others! And I-I'm sure as hell not leaving you alone in your last m-moments!"

The day after the catastrophe with Crane, they all went out searching for her body to give her a proper funeral and bury her under her favorite tree to sit under and relax, but they never did find her body.

Which was probably a good thing, because her body would've likely been a mangled corpse after falling from so high in the sky. *Maybe that's where this is coming from,* he wondered. *Since we never had a proper burial for her, maybe I'm trying to compensate in some way.*

Crane fell atop of him, holding him close and wrapping her wing around him as she sobbed, *just like Flame would...*

The way she held him felt similar to Flame; maybe because that's the only dragon he's cuddled with in the last two years.

So he imagined her as Flame instead, knowing that'd probably bring him the strange calmness that he needed right now, and take away

from the thought that Crane was hugging him until he passed.

So he closed his eyes and imagined his bright red scales, the warmth of his touch as he slowly caressed his back, the slow rises and falls of his chest as he breathed, the way he'd wrap him up in his wings like a blanket on a cold winter morning, and most importantly, the soothing rumble of his voice as he spoke; the way he talked always seemed to calm him down.

And then everything felt less, all of the pain and trauma he's gone through fading away behind the scenes like it was the end of a performance, like nothing else mattered except his gracious touch, and he was finally calm for the first time in what felt like forever.

But he's not really here, and I might never really see him again, not some fake imagination of him, the real him, he thought. *Oh, Flame, I wish you were here with me right now, you make everything feel better.*

He cuddled Flame — no — Crane even tighter than before, wrapping his wings around her as tight as he could. Except, something felt different now like his talons and arms and wings were sinking in more than before, as if he was gripping onto the thick blood itself.

"Crane?"

He opened his eyes to see that there was nobody above him anymore, nobody hugging him close, no sobs splitting through the air, nothing. It was as if she had disappeared into thin air.

He poked his head up and looked around, but saw nothing except the endless pool of blood that stretched into the distance endlessly. "Crane? Where'd you go?" he called out.

He tried to sit up but was forced back down by a stinging pain with an 'Ack!', too weak to fight through it.

He gripped his side as the wound that had just begun to start clotting had opened up again, which brought him a stinging pain in his side. "Crane?" he tried again.

Where'd she go? he wondered. *She was just here! Why'd she disappear*

like that? He was hoping that Crane disappeared because he would move on from this nightmare and onto the next, but a part of him knew that this was far from the case, and his mind was about to torture him in some other way.

Then, almost like another stab to his side, he heard a bloodcurdling scream off in the distance somewhere, followed by "UMBER! HELP!"

This sent a shiver down his spine, and a jolt of dread went flying through his entire body. Her voice echoed throughout the void, each wave of screams scaring him even more than before. "Crane?!"

"NO! NO! GET OFF OF ME PLEASE!" she cried. "UMBER!"

"Crane, I'm coming! Hold on!"

With pure panic and adrenaline running through his veins, he forced himself to his feet, fighting through the excruciating pain in his side as his motivation was saving Crane from whatever got ahold of her. He was prepared to go through this pain all over again, twenty times over if it meant saving her — even the fake her — from dying as he was forced to watch.

As he stood, he gripped his side painfully and started walking slowly, each step making him want to fall down and lay there and die, but he wasn't going to lay there and listen to Crane's ear ringing screams as whatever had her, killed her.

Even just that thought sent more fear rushing through him than before, further increasing the speed at which he moved. From a slow walk to a walk, to a light jog, he kept moving as he splashed through the endless pool.

Though the faster he moved meant the pain was significantly more, letting whatever had her keep her didn't seem like a realistic option right now.

After a few minutes of listening to Crane's screams, his jog turned into a light sprint. He realized he was hardly getting closer, exhaustion slowly wearing him down bit by bit. Whatever this pit

was that his mind created, it was endless; unforgivingly endless, and it reeked.

The further he went out, the pool seemed to get deeper and deeper, until it was up to his neck. Running was nearly impossible at this point, but he had already come this far, and he wasn't going to let Crane die. Not again.

But only a few seconds later, the ground seemingly disappeared and he couldn't feel the bottom anymore. In his exhausted state, he could hardly swim either and his whole body was dunked under

He desperately tried to swim to the top, but he could hardly move himself. Both the pain and exhaustion were setting in now that he had a sort of break and he felt like he was drowning, now more than ever.

I won't be able to save her, Umber thought with an ache of sadness. *I had another chance to save her and I couldn't. I failed again.*

And there he sank, deeper and deeper into his pit of guilt, knowingly letting Crane die again. Although the thought of his lungs slowly filling with blood as he suffocated sounded like one of the most horrible ways to go, he at least could move on to the next dream and forget about all of this. *Hopefully.*

And finally, he touched the bottom and closed his eyes. But as he laid there, waiting to finally succumb to suffocation, he had a flashback. Perhaps it was by chance, or maybe it was his mind reminding him of what he was giving up on, but it gave him the strength he needed.

"Go win this war for me, alright?"

That's when a realization struck him. As her words resonated in his head, echoing over and over and over again, he had a realization. *She wasn't talking about the SandWing Succession war...* Umber thought. *She was talking about me; me winning this war between me and myself...* And the only way he knew he could start was by saving her here and now.

His eyes jolted open, and now he knew what he had to do.

With a new motivation, he pushed himself up and off of the blood ocean floor, kicking and pushing himself as hard as he could, the only thing in his mind being to save Crane. Each kick made his side feel like it was getting stabbed over and over again, but that hardly bothered him anymore.

He kept swimming for what felt like forever, and just when he felt like he was about to pass out from the lack of oxygen, he finally reached the top and began gulping down air; sweet, sweet air.

But as he wiped his eyes and prepared himself to keep swimming in an endless, dark abyss only home to an entire ocean of blood, he realized that he wasn't *in* that ocean of blood anymore, but was instead somewhere different.

He looked down at what he expected to be blood, only to realize that he was swimming in a tiny pond of — normal — water now, and surrounding it was stone, endless amounts of stone.

The edges of the pond had sharp edges, as if a sinkhole had happened right where he was swimming and rain filled the land's place. He could see that there were many of these scattered around in seemingly random places, but they all were similar in size and shape.

The air itself was filled with ash, smoke, and debris, making him feel like he needed to cough almost immediately.

As he took a closer look at the area around him, there seemed to be endless spires around him, all different sizes. Some narrow and pointy, some large with the tips being dull. But they all had one thing in common: they all gave him an unnerving feeling that this place might be even worse than the blood pit (which is what he called it now).

Not only were there these strange spires, but many, many mountains surrounded him, making the landscape ridged and seemingly hard to navigate, especially in his condition.

Normally his first thought would be to fly, but he knew he couldn't; not now; not with his fatigued state. He knew he couldn't fly for more than a few seconds before having to rest again.

Most of the blood that was on him before dissipated into the water as it mixed around before quickly disappearing. Slowly, he pushed himself through the water, before quickly getting to the edge where he slowly pulled himself out, his only restriction being the wound in his side as it was still bleeding.

The added pressure from pulling himself up didn't help, of course. But that thought was quickly cut off when he heard another bloodcurdling scream from Crane.

"LET GO OF ME!" she yelled, her voice echoing in the distance. "NO! STOP!" Another scream was heard from her in the distance, except this time it sounded like a scream of pain instead of one in fear.

"Crane! Where are you?!" he yelled back. Though he couldn't tell north from south here, his mental compass still worked all the same as long as he made up directions.

Her screams are coming from the north, he thought. He already began painfully taking each step, going into a light jog almost immediately while trying to hold his side, which definitely wasn't easy because of how far down it was.

The terrain was certainly hard to navigate through, especially when going up and down hills. But he pushed on because leaving Crane wasn't an option; besides, he's already made it this far, and he certainly wasn't going to waste his second chance.

I'd rather die than watch her die again.

At one point, he got to a tall mountain where at least three or four spires spiked out of the mountain around him and could see the full scope of what this place looked like.

He could see miles in the distance, where lightning and thunder boomed constantly even though there was no rain; or even clouds

for that matter. The lightning was just coming from somewhere miles in the sky, past how far he could see through the smoke.

He didn't dwell on that too much though, and kept moving in the direction he last heard Crane scream.

Minutes passed without any calls for help, and he began getting worried for her. *Am I too late? Did whatever that took her away kill her already? Hold on a little longer, Crane, I'm coming.*

But he could slowly feel himself getting weaker and weaker as the seconds ticked by. As he looked behind him, he could see a long blood trail that followed him the whole way there. Constantly opening up the wound as soon as it began to clot probably didn't help the most either. *I don't have much time left!*

But right when he felt about ready to give up and fall over, his head poked over a hill and saw a horrific sight he promised he'd never let happen again: Icicle was standing atop a hill, and locked in her talons was Crane.

She had her claws comfortably raised to her throat, ready to slash at any second. Her gaze was unnerving, just like before.

"Please let go of me! I don't want to die!" Crane cried desperately as tears pelted down her face. "I'll give you anything, just let us go!

"Let go of her!" Umber tried desperately, breaking into a near sprint. His wound hurt more than ever, but Crane was right in front of him, hardly a hundred feet away.

But his cries were ignored and Icicle only stared at him. Her ice cold glare made it feel like a million different icicles were stabbing their way through his scales and coming out the back, pinning him to a wall so he couldn't move.

"No matter how hard you try, you'll never be able to save her," was all Icicle said with a big smile before slashing her talons across Crane's throat. Blood immediately began spilling everywhere, all down her next and across her chest.

Icicle let go of her, leaving her to grip her talons around her throat,

before her eyes fell closed and she began rag dolling down the hill.

"NO!" His yell swept across the landscape, before echoing back to him and reminding him of his failure a few times before fading back into oblivion.

He felt tears begin to fall down his face. His legs almost felt like they were moving for him when he sprinted over to her and fell down next to her; he was too weak to stand any longer. This was it.

Blood continued gushing from her throat, spilling all over the stone and staining it red. Icicle just stood atop the small hill with a massive grin spread across her face as if she thought this was funny.

"Crane..." He cuddled her corpse close. Though she was already gone, he could still see the hint of terror on her face as she begged for her life. His wound especially hurt now, and he could see that it was bleeding more than ever as it stained his talons.

Their blood mixed as it slowly flowed down the hill. He sobbed, hoping that it would miraculously bring her back to life, even if he was in a dream. *I failed again,* he thought. *I had another chance to come back here and save you, and I blew it.*

His head fell next to hers and he wrapped his wing around her, their tails intertwined all the while. "I'm so sorry," he whispered.

But as the seconds passed, he felt his eyes get heavier and heavier, and his muscles becoming even more fatigued than before. But he didn't fight it anymore, he already did what he came here to do, and he failed miserably.

His eyes sealed shut as he took his final breath, officially marking the end of his latest failure.

And then everything went black. No next dream, no feeling like another dose of tranquilizer was being pumped into him, nothing. It was all just silent, a black abyss where he didn't feel fear, pain, or sadness. It was just nothing.

Am I dead? he thought. *Is this what the afterlife is like? Will I be stuck here forever?*

But the next thing he knew, there was a blinding light shining in his face. It was as if he was seeing the light of day for the first time in years, and his eyes opened to a boring white ceiling.

Where am I? he thought.

All around his body, he felt something wrapped around him tightly, and a pain as if he was just recovering from spilling boiling water all over himself. *Or a fire...*

He felt a pressure on his chest, like someone was laying on him. He hoped — prayed it would be Flame, laying there waiting to greet him as he awoke fully for the first time in forever before probably being put back under.

But as he tilted his head down, he was only half disappointed to see Clay's head resting on his chest. He almost looked like he was falling asleep.

"Clay?"

Author's note: Whew! That was a heavy chapter, what a way to finally end off on Umber waking up. I could've added more chapters before this, but I really did find it mentally taxing to continue writing Flame in his state, and probably for you to read it as well.

PS: I don't know if you caught it, but I'm really proud of Umber sinking to the bottom of the blood pool being a metaphor of his guilt taking over as he was giving up.

IMPORTANT UPDATE

I'll no longer be posting Healed 2 on Wattpad, and will instead be posting only on Fanfiction.net and AO3. My username is the same, and the chapter is already up on both of them. I don't get many views here, so I just don't think it's worth it, especially with some of the bugs I go through when pasting. Sorry!